

THE FRENCH MASTER

THE 'RENCH MASTER

BY

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FRONTISPIECE BY F. H. TOWNSEND

1900

LONDON

D, LOCK AND CO. LIMITED
NEW YORK AND MELBOURNE

CHAPTER I

LAWRENCE ENSOR passed through the great swinging doors of the restaurant into the street veiled in impenetrable fog and stood for a moment uncertain. The night was comparatively young—Big Ben had hardly chimed eleven—but the fog, the worst of the season, had affected London with a temporary paralysis, and only a hoarse cry here and there, and a distant rumble, expressed the crowded traffic common to Piccadilly at that hour.

A voice at his elbow made him start. It was the commissionaire of the restaurant who spoke. "I'd whistle you up a hansom, sir," the man said, peering out into the blackness, "but I don't think you would get one to-night; and, even if you did, it would be safer to walk."

"Oh, thanks, it doesn't matter. I'll certainly walk," returned Lawrence. "I agree with you as to the safety of doing so," he con-

tinued, as a bewildered horse, dragging a four-wheeler after it, appeared suddenly on the pavement, and floundering for a moment among the lamp-posts, like a grounded whale, dived off again into the fog.

"Have you far to go, sir?" asked the man sympathetically.

"Well, yes; as far as Hampstead, I am afraid."

"Bless me, sir, it'll take you all your time, as things are to-night. But perhaps it'll be clearer when you get north of the Circus."

"I hope so, at least," Lawrence said, as, tipping the man, he stepped out on his journey.

"'Twas ever thus since childhood's hour," he reflected grimly, as he plodded along, keeping the shops on his left carefully within touch of his hand. "Yesterday a hansom would have been something of a luxury to me; to-day, when I could buy a dozen of them, there is not one to be got! However, there is always to-morrow. So *vogue la pedestrianisme*! It would take a great deal to make me pessimistic to-night. That last bottle of Brut was good. Those fellows at the restaurant will be getting drunk if they keep it up much longer. I hope they didn't think it rude of me to leave them, but Davenport knew I had this ap-

pointment ; and he can play the host much better than I. Besides, they were too jolly to miss me. . . .

“That reminds me, I have had quite enough myself,” he continued, as he almost collided with a lamp-post at the corner of Regent Circus. “Or else this fog is affecting me. But what matters it ! A poor briefless barrister, who has never before had a shilling to spend, may be excused for getting a little merry on the night which first sees him possessor of a thousand a year. Oh, blessed legacy ! By Jove ! no more duns and debts and difficulties—no more troubles ! For what troubles have I ever had but those which come from want of money ? It seems too good to be true—but it *is* true ; and to-morrow I begin a new life, as the Silver King says. . . . Meanwhile I have forgotten to keep a look-out for Baker Street, and where the deuce am I ?”

Lawrence stood still suddenly and looked about him. Where was he ? It was impossible to say. Around him and above him hung the dense fog, impenetrable to the vision, and black with the shades of night. Not even a street lamp could be distinguished, and London itself for once seemed as silent as a dead city. However, the pavement under

his feet told him that he was still on the foot-path, and he walked on until a red glimmer above his head disclosed the presence of a friendly gas-lamp.

It was something definite at last, and for a moment he leaned against the cold iron standard, damp with the mist, and listened in the hope that some vehicle or belated foot-passenger might arrive and give him a clue to his position.

The street he stood in must have been a wide one, he concluded, for even by straining his eyes he could catch no glimpse of the corresponding lights on the other side of the way. He stepped across the pavement, and met a row of iron railings tipped with sharp spikes. Unfortunately he carried no matches, but it seemed to him from the damp smell and a certain blurred outline of shrubs that small gardens separated the fence from the houses which bordered the pavements. He had then probably passed Baker Street. Could he have instinctively taken the right way, and was this the Finchley Road?

Suddenly—how he hardly knew—Lawrence became aware that something was happening in the middle of the street. That strange instinct which informs us of the presence of other living beings when we enter a darkened

but occupied chamber, seemed to tell Lawrence that there were people near him, though the fog, or perhaps their cautious movement, allowed no other sign of their presence to transpire.

He stepped to the edge of the kerbstone, and listened. A low murmur, as of muffled voices, reached him, and then the rattle of a horse's bit, with a sharp exclamation from the driver. After that all was still again.

Lawrence felt relieved, he scarcely knew why. "There is a carriage waiting outside some house over the way," he decided, "and the street is not so wide as I thought." And he started forward in the direction of the last sound.

However, even as he stepped from the pavement into the damp and muddy roadway he halted suddenly ; for swiftly from the darkness before him came an oath, and then the cry of a woman—the shrill scream of anguish or despair.

Ensor was both cool-headed and brave ; but for an instant he stood stupid and confused, as a blind man might stand in a strange room where some tragedy was being enacted. The stealthy movements, the muffled voices, so near him, yet separated from him so completely by the fog, robbed him for a moment

of his presence of mind. And after that moment he felt that it was too late.

He clenched his fists, and, standing ready to spring, strained his eyeballs into the darkness. A stifled sound of sobbing at last seemed to direct him, and he moved forward.

Presently he stumbled against some object, and, raising his eyes, he saw the red gleam of a carriage lamp. The sobbing sounded very near him now.

He passed round the wheel, which he had stumbled over, to the side of the carriage, and looked in at the window. By the dull light thrown from the back glass of the lamp he could distinguish a girl in evening dress seated in the vehicle. He was wondering vaguely what had caused her to scream, when a woman appeared at the opposite door and opened it swiftly.

She was carrying the second lamp of the brougham in her hand, and, flinging herself upon her knees on the floor of the carriage, she turned the light full on its occupant. Barely noticing that she was in evening costume, Ensor followed her gaze, and shuddered.

The brilliant circle of light, leaving the rest of the interior dark, shone on the pale, unconscious features of a lovely girl. She was lying

back on her seat, motionless, with her eyes closed. Her long dark lashes rested on her cheek, white as the bosom which her opera-cloak, in falling back, had revealed. In her breast was a dreadful wound, from which the blood flowed, staining the glittering embroidery of her dress.

As the second woman, sobbing breathlessly, leaned over her and attempted to staunch the stream, the dying woman's eyes opened and fixed themselves with a terrible stare, while her feeble fingers strove to push away the small lace handkerchief which the other was pressing to the wound. "Murderess! murderess!" she cried, hissing out the words with a ferocity almost appalling in its intensity. "Now, are you glad!"

The hatred in her tone made Lawrence shudder, and caused the other woman to sink despairingly to the ground. "Oh, my darling, my darling!" she gasped, in heart breaking accents, "how can you! how can you!"

At this moment, and while Lawrence still stood spellbound and appalled, a hasty exclamation rose from behind him. He was seized suddenly by strong arms and flung roughly aside. He heard a man spring quickly to the box of the carriage and flog the horse,

which started swiftly off. The carriage whirled away, the still open door slamming to and fro violently as the brougham rocked with the speed of its course.

For an instant Lawrence, after he had recovered his feet, stood gasping. Then he commenced to run in the direction taken by the carriage, which had long since disappeared, swallowed up by the fog.

For a while it seemed to him that he heard before him the banging of the door and the rattle of the horse's feet on the stones ; but after a time he lost all certainty as to the direction of the sound ; and only the horror of the sight he had witnessed kept him still engaged in a chase which, owing to the denseness of the fog, might at any moment end fatally for him.

At last, weary and breathless, in the now complete silence, he stopped. His efforts were useless—he knew it. This carriage with its terrible burden had disappeared, lost, perhaps, for ever. Yet the face of that dying girl haunted him with its pathetic eyes and fearful wound—a wound that, even to his inexperienced eyes, told of nothing but death. The criminals must not evade him. That other woman, with the man who had seized him and cast him from the brougham so

roughly—her accomplice, probably—must be traced and captured. Every moment was precious if they were not to escape—yet how to stop them?

Lawrence Ensor had dined well on this day which had broken so fortunately for him, and he had drunk a considerable quantity of champagne in company with some other Templars—young and careless like himself—but he was nevertheless in full possession of all his faculties. Still the suddenness of this terrible adventure had made him stupid. What is more disagreeable, what more confusing than to find oneself lost at night in a London fog? Lawrence had no idea how to discover a police-station or even a policeman. He had possessed but the very vaguest ideas of his whereabouts at the time the affair of the brougham had attracted his attention. In following the carriage in his wild and futile pursuit he had succeeded in getting himself a dozen times more hopelessly lost. He could not even tell now how far he might have run from the scene of this mysterious crime.

Overwhelmed by his anxiety and his impotence, Lawrence stopped at the first lamp-post, and resting his burning forehead against its cool iron, he reflected.

Presently he became aware that footsteps

were approaching him : some one was making his way towards the lamp-post, humming a tune as he came. Lawrence stepped forward ; but the new-comer completed the verse he had been singing before he took any notice of the man standing in his road.

“ All right, constable,” he said, at last, rather thickly, “ all right—I’m getting along rippingly. Don’t trouble about me ! ”

“ Great heavens, Davenport ! ” exclaimed Lawrence.

It was his friend of the restaurant supper, the young man in whose favour he had resigned his position as host. Lawrence knew his voice at once ; but he, hardly so quick, peered up doubtfully through the fog. Then he recognized Ensor and laughed.

“ Lawrence Ensor ! ” he cried. “ By Jove, old fellow, you did a wise thing when you left us ! I sacrificed myself nobly in your stead. I shall bring the grey hairs of my maiden aunt in sorrow to the grave ; but I saw that supper through for your sake. They were all merry—as doubtless you intended they should be—and they have gone their several ways. I saw the last of them off an hour ago ; and now I am beating up for home. Everything went off smiling—and every one also. There is only a trifle of broken glass to pay for—

however, that's nothing. But where the deuce are you going? This is not your way."

"Where, in God's name, are we, Davenport?"

"Eh? Oh! In the Outer Circle."

"Regent's Park? Are you sure?"

"Sure? Yes. I may be a little drunk, but I've a wonderful homing instinct. I never lose my way. My aunt lives about a quarter of a mile farther on. I can't ask you in because she's rather particular about early hours, and I shall have to climb the area railings; but I can put you on your way. Hang it, I'll even see you home if you like!"

"Davenport, which is the nearest police-station?"

"Police-station? Not far; but what on earth? . . . I've already interviewed the police once to-night."

"You have? What about?"

"Oh, nothing much . . . only . . . there was a little bit of bother at the restaurant. I couldn't quite keep those fellows in order after you left."

Lawrence reflected. Then he took Davenport by the arm. "Are you sober enough to show me the way?" he said.

"To the police-station? Oh, my dear fellow, on the contrary, I'm not drunk enough."

Ensor bit his lip. "Davenport," he said, "I am not joking. This is a serious matter. Pull yourself together. I must communicate with the police at once! Good God, I am wasting time even now! Listen to me—I have seen a most horrible thing to-night."

Davenport stared. "Really? What was it?" he asked, surprised.

When Lawrence had described what he had witnessed, his friend looked up and attempted to catch a glimpse of his face through the darkness. Then he gave a whistle. "Fancy!" he said, "And you drank less than any of us!" Lawrence dropped his arm quickly. "You don't believe me!" he muttered impatiently.

Davenport smiled. "Oh, well, old man, you see these fogs are peculiar things—especially after supper. I wouldn't go to the police-station with such a tale if I were you; at least, not until you have slept upon it."

Ensor stamped his foot impatiently. Yet he felt he was at the mercy of this sceptical reveller. "Oh, great heavens!" he groaned, "can't you see that this is serious?"

"I can, I can! Devilish serious—for you! But come, old fellow, I'll sacrifice myself on the altar of friendship. I'll dare my aunt's wrath for your sake, though she's all I have in the world. Come—over the area railings!

And when you've had a whisky and soda you'll feel quite yourself again."

Ensor, almost out of his mind, took his friend by the collar at last, and shook him until his teeth chattered. "Show me the way to the police-station," he said, "or——"

"Oh, since you put it that way," said Davenport breathlessly. "Certainly, with all the pleasure in life. But, for goodness' sake, old fellow, don't shake me again! I shall lose my homing instinct, and then we shall both get lost. Come, follow me! We are unobserved, or I would have you up for assault for shaking me."

And he turned back along the way they had come.

Davenport, in spite of the exhilaration of his spirits, appeared to be quite sure of his road; and ere long they stopped before a good-sized building, outside which paced a constable on duty. It was the police-station. Ensor addressed a word or two to the man on guard, and then went in to interview the inspector.

The latter, a business-like looking man, listened to Lawrence's story with attention; but he shrugged his shoulders slightly at the replies which the young barrister gave to his questions.

“ Well, really, sir,” he said, after a moment’s reflection, “ you certainly tell me a most startling story. But you must confess that the information which you appear able to afford is very slight. You say you would not be able to recognize either the man who, as you assert, pushed you away from the carriage, or the woman who, as you suppose, committed this murder. You do not know what this mysterious carriage was like, or what colour the horse was——”

“ How was it possible to notice all these things in the fog ? ” said Lawrence irritably. “ Besides, as I tell you, the whole affair occurred so suddenly—took me so by surprise—that——”

“ And you have merely the very vaguest idea where it all took place,” continued the inspector. “ You imagine that it may have been in the Finchley Road, because there were gardens between the pavement and the houses. But that is the case with a hundred streets—in fact with most of the streets in this district. You do not know how far you may have run after the carriage. It may have been one mile, it may have been two——”

“ Certainly, I cannot tell. I should say rather one than two.”

“ And your companion ? Was he with you ? ” asked the inspector, presently, turning to Davenport, who had wandered in, and stood smiling by the fireplace.

That individual looked up quickly. “ Lord, no ! ” he said. “ I stayed to keep the supper going.”

Ensor saw the inspector’s eye run over the young man’s dishevelled evening-dress, which his rough handling had not improved in appearance.

“ What supper was this ? ” he inquired.

“ A supper I was giving to a few friends at Cosetti’s,” said Lawrence hastily, wishing that Davenport had remained outside, and angrily watching a look of comprehension steal over the inspector’s face.

“ At Cosetti’s ? ” The inspector turned and spoke a few words into a tube at his side. A man in plain clothes appeared presently, and they exchanged a few sentences.

“ There was some trouble at this restaurant ? ” asked the inspector at length, turning to Davenport.

“ Davenport flushed. Oh, there was a little glass broken, I think. Some of us were rather lively. But I stopped the row . . . it was all settled.”

“ And you, Mr. Ensor, were present at this

supper—you were the host ? ” inquired the inspector.

Ensor bit his lip at the tone in which the man asked the question. “ Yes,” he said, “ but I left early. You surely can see that I am perfectly sober ! ”

The inspector, with another glance at Davenport, smiled. “ Oh, perfectly, perfectly, I am sure,” he said quietly. “ Well, Mr. Ensor, you have told me all you know of this strange affair of the brougham. There is nothing more we can require from you at present. Every inquiry shall be made. Meanwhile, shall one of my men see you home ? I should advise your going home. It is almost morning.”

Ensor frowned. He read the inspector’s thoughts. “ You imagine all this is merely the consequence of a few glasses of champagne, and that I did not really see what I tell you ! ” he cried impatiently.

The inspector waved his hand deprecatingly. “ Oh, Mr. Ensor, not at all. I assure you that every inquiry shall be made. But you can be of no further assistance to us to-night. My men will do all that can be done.”

Ensor clenched his hands. He could see that a very considerable doubt rested in the man’s mind ; but what could he say ? “ Very

well, sir," he said at last. " We will go. But remember, a crime has been committed in London to-night——"

" If that is the case—and of course I do not doubt your word," said the inspector soothingly, " you may be sure we shall hear more of it. I will certainly communicate with you. Good-night, Mr. Ensor."

Ensor shrugged his shoulders and walked out, followed by Davenport, who was giggling. The fog had cleared by now, with a suddenness peculiar to those phenomena, and only a slight haze remained.

Davenport looked up at Ensor, as he stood gazing about him.

" What on earth made you tell the fellow such a yarn as that ? " he said. " You look as sober as a judge."

" Oh, go to the devil ! " said Lawrence impatiently. And turning, he left him.

Davenport hesitated, and then, with a wave of his hand and a little laugh, he passed on his road.

Ensor, irritated and despairing, made his way slowly homewards, forgetting his appointment at Hampstead. The face of that dying girl lingered still in his memory : and the words, " Murderess ! Now are you glad ? " still seemed to thrill his heart with their con-

centrated and bitter hatred. "And these fools believe that I dreamed all this!" he groaned, "and those wretches will escape!"

However, as he neared his chambers, he recovered his spirits to a certain extent. There was no doubt that, whether he believed his story or not, the inspector would make every effort to verify it; and with the vagueness of his own knowledge it was impossible for even Ensor to do more. Nevertheless, his dreams were haunted that night by the terrible scene he had witnessed; and ever and again he heard the reproach of those bitter words, and shivered as he saw that frightful wound which the other woman, sobbing, tried in vain to staunch.

* * * *

For some days Lawrence haunted the police-station in the Northern district, and expected that each knock would bring him news of the mysterious crime. But no news came; and at length the concern which had never taken a very great importance in the eyes of the Force, passed from their immediate memory. Only Lawrence, for a time, continued to give any thought to the affair; but, in spite of his efforts it seemed destined to remain for ever a mystery.

CHAPTER II

LAWRENCE ENSOR seated himself at the long table d'hôte of the *Hotel d'Italie*, Viareggio, and commenced to eat his dinner, quietly observant of his fellow guests. These were, however, to tell the truth, neither numerous nor amusing ; and it was not long before he began to wish that he had had the courage to bring with him to table a rather fiery novel by D'Annuncio, upon which he had been engaged during the afternoon.

The party consisted of a middle-aged lady, rather deaf, and not particularly interesting ; the local *dottore*, engaged in conversation with a young Marchese who owned a villa near the hotel, and spent most of his time in the company of the fishermen and their wives, being poverty-stricken and, like most of his fellows, not at all select in his ideas ; and a retired Major of Indian Cavalry, who was too much

engrossed in his dinner to care for conversation.

Lawrence, after taking in these various characters with an eye trained by some months of table d'hôte experience, sighed and turned to his *frittata*, without noticing that there were three more places arranged opposite to him than there had been at lunch, and that, by the particularly folded serviettes and the unopened fiasco of red wine standing in front of the centre seat, some new arrivals were expected to dinner.

However, when the third course was almost completed the door opened, and the head waiter appeared ushering in three people, whose appearance created a mild stir among the present diners, and caused even Lawrence himself to forget the *Triumph of Death*, whose absence he had been regretting, and turn his attention instead to one of the triumphs of Life—a beautiful girl.

Was she a girl? She looked young enough to be so described. There was no wedding-ring on the fair white hand whose fingers were engaged in unfolding the complicated shape into which her serviette had been twisted. And her figure was lithe and youthful—but her eyes? One careless glance from those deep grey eyes had made Lawrence think of so

many things—of passion, and troubled dreams, and weariness of self, and other gifts of the gods, of which youth knows so little—that he hesitated, and turned his attention to her companions.

Simple these ! An old man, very old, very weary, evidently an invalid, with an intellectual clean-shaven face and high wrinkled forehead, who, with the slight bow and swift comprehensive glance of an old traveller, took his place at the table and became instantly occupied with his dinner. And a young girl—no doubt about the youth this time—a girl of eighteen or so, with fair hair and laughing blue eyes, the amused excited eyes of youth, making its first foreign travel, and almost its first appearance at table d'hôte, and taking it all in breathlessly.

Not that there was really much to take in, as the laughing blue eyes soon discovered, turning to Lawrence from their tour of the table with almost a little beam of relief at last. Indeed, the thoughts in their owner's mind were so transparent that Lawrence, who had, nevertheless, not an atom of conceit for his handsome dark face, smiled slightly as the eyes met his, and was rewarded with a little blush.

The young girl turned quickly to her companion on the left—the old gentleman—and

murmured a few words to him, and the pair were soon engaged in conversation. It was evident that the old man's affections were keenly engaged with his young neighbour, for his worn eyes lighted up as he listened to her gay account of a drive in the *Pineta*, and he smiled fondly on her as she chatted.

Meanwhile, the third member of the party remained silent and absorbed ; and Lawrence examined her afresh and with interest.

Tall and dark—he had remarked her almost commanding figure as she first entered the room—with an Eastern paleness of skin, relieved, however, by the vivid crimson of her lips ; with deep and rather gloomy grey eyes, and a heavy coil of black hair carried low over the straight line of her eyebrows ; this lady, whose age and status Lawrence had been unable to determine, fascinated him strangely. Indeed, even the most unimaginative observer must have been compelled to acknowledge the beauty and attempt to guess at the secret of that impassive face ; and Lawrence was rather a man whom a mystery piqued.

The stranger herself, however, gave him little assistance in his attempt to fathom her. She sat silent and self-contained, eating little, yet hardly raising her eyes, after the first glance which Lawrence had encountered, from

her plate ; and her two companions, either engrossed in their own conversation, or in compliance with her mood, did not address her during the meal.

The three rose together when coffee had been handed round, and Lawrence, holding a position near the door, opened it to permit them to pass out. A little smile from the young girl thanked him for the act, and a courteous bow came from the old gentleman who, to Lawrence's surprise, preceded the beautiful sphinx from the room ; but only the very slightest motion of the latter's stately head expressed that his rather eager look had been noticed ; and he went back to his seat, feeling a thrill of disappointment.

" It is surely impossible that she can be the governess," he thought, " or even the companion of that pretty little girl—yet why did she make way for the old gentleman ? And why did he accept the sacrifice so much as a matter of course ? Can that fascinating impassivity be merely the trained diffidence of an inferior ? "

Lawrence made his way to the hall, after observing that none of the party were still about, and examined the visitors' book. It gave him little information, of course. There was an entry of the day before—

“ il Signore Walters.”

“ La Signorina Walters.”

“ La Signorina Madeleine Leicester.”

So it ran. But this had evidently been inscribed by the hall-porter, and told him little save *her* name. “ Madeleine Leicester.” The old gentleman would be the Signore Walters, and the young girl his daughter or grand-daughter, as Lawrence had presumed. It left Madeleine Leicester’s position as undefined as before, save for the “ Signorina.” She was apparently unmarried—but then, who could put faith in hall-porters !

Lawrence, with a smile at his interest in his handsome fellow-guest, decided that the morrow would probably bring elucidation ; and, taking his cap from the rack in the hall, he strolled out on to the beach.

It was a glorious moonlight night. A full yellow globe illuminated the deep blue sky—one of those fierce Italian moons which seem almost to give out heat as well as light. The Mediterranean, only a little distance from the hotel, lay stretched out before him, glistening like warm oil, and visible in the brightness as far as Spezzia on the one hand and Leghorn on the other. Behind rose the deep purple mountains of Carrara, with their piebald patches and ragged cliffs of marble.

Lawrence strolled along the beach, and coming to the Molo, made his way to the end overlooking the sea. The season had hardly commenced yet, and the long breakwater was deserted.

He took a seat in the corner of one of the wooden benches, which a few weeks later would be filled by one of the most cosmopolitan crowds in Europe, and, lighting a cigar, he allowed his thoughts to wander.

It was some months since the day when he had inherited, through the death of a relative, the thousand a year which had meant so much to him, living at that time on his debts and an occasional brief obtained more by influence than merit. Not that Lawrence had not merit, but that the quality was waiting an opportunity to display itself; and the "friendly" briefs were not of a sort to require much skill, for friendship takes no risks now-a-days. He was a handsome young fellow of seven or eight and twenty, very good-hearted and intelligent, rather careless and haphazard and rather too much given to being all things to all men. For being all things to all men unfortunately means looking at both sides of every question; and looking at both sides of every question means not fixing your mind on one side, and that means usually failure in

this world--unless, of course, you chance to inherit a thousand a year.

As Lawrence sat and smoked, and reviewed his Continental wanderings of the past few months—Italy, France, Belgium, Spain—*tout le tremblement*—he presently became aware of a slight rustling beneath his feet. He looked round him, but he could see nothing to account for the noise. Then he turned and glanced over the back of the seat on which he had been resting.

Below him, half a dozen feet down, on a wooden buttress of the breakwater, was a woman, who was looking up with rather a startled air. She stood with her back to the moonlight and the shining sea, and Ensor could not see her face very distinctly ; but it certainly seemed to him that she was in trouble ; and it was probable from the position in which she found herself that his surmise was correct.

“ Can I help you ? ” he asked in Italian.

“ Thank you—if you will ? ” came the reply in a deep, rich voice, and in perfect Tuscan Italian. “ It is very stupid of me, but I cannot get up again.”

Ensor stretched down his hands. “ Allow me to take your wrists,” he said. “ Don’t be frightened. One—two—three ! ” And with

a lift from him, the woman scrambled up on to the rail of the benches, whence she dropped lightly and gracefully to the ground, or rather, to the deck of the Molo.

"How strong you are!" she said, with a little laugh. "Thank you so much. It was stupid of me to go down there; but it was so quiet and peaceful in the moonlight, and I had seen men fishing from there this morning. I was afraid I might have to stay there all night. But——" she broke off with a smile. "You are English, and I am talking Italian to you." "Miss Leicester!" exclaimed Ensor, incautiously, recognizing the lady of the hotel dinner.

She stared, and then, bowing slightly, turned away. "Thank you again, and good-night," she said quietly.

But Lawrence turned too. "Forgive me for making such a slip," he said quickly. I glanced at the hotel book as I came out, and so I—I guessed your name. I am staying at the *d'Italie*. May I walk home with you?"

Miss Leicester looked at him for a moment. "Why not?" she said at last. "Yes, certainly you may, if you wish to."

And they strolled towards the beach.

"What good Italian you speak!" said

Ensor. "I had no idea but that it was some fair Florentine whom I was rescuing."

"*Tuscan* Italian, yes, perhaps I do. I have often been in Italy. But there are so many kinds of Italian. I am quite lost in Naples ; and I have known even Italians themselves puzzled by Piedmontese."

As they reached the end of the Mòlo, Lawrence halted and looked back over the moonlit sea, deep into which the breakwater thrust its black shadow. Miss Leicester turned, too, and followed his gaze.

"How very peaceful it all is!" she said softly. "If only the crowds wouldn't come!"

"You don't care for crowds?"

Miss Leicester did not reply at once. "They say that in the hotel, in one of the upper rooms," she said, at last, "there lives a man who for ten years has never left his apartment. Yet he is quite strong and well. Have you heard the story?"

"Yes. I believe he is sane, too. That is," Lawrence continued, laughing, "as sane as any one can be who is so evidently mad."

"Do you think he must be mad?" said Miss Leicester thoughtfully. "Why? His window looks on to the ever-changing Mediterranean—this wonderful sea, one day so

calm, the next so furious. It is as treacherous as the world, perhaps ; but then, from what a height he views it ! Probably he hates his fellow-men, but if he should not, beneath his window pass people from every corner of the earth. He has sufficient money for his needs ; servants at his call, for whom he has no responsibility ; books to read—I hear he constantly receives fresh books. Mad ? Ah ! I have sometimes thought how he is to be envied ! ”

Lawrence watched her while she spoke, evidently only faintly conscious of his presence. Her deep grey eyes were fixed on the horizon, with a look that was hopeless, despairing. He was silent, and presently she gave a little start, and turned towards home, walking rather quickly. She had evidently remembered herself, and her manner, when next she spoke, had altered.

Lawrence sighed. “ I have an idea that when next I meet this young lady I shall need to be re-introduced,” he thought. “ And yet for a moment there was a chance that I might have known more of her real self than six months of ordinary acquaintance might tell me. Perhaps it was the consequence of the moonlight. Something has certainly affected me, for I feel excessively disappointed, and

I have scarcely known her long enough to take such an interest in her.”

But here Lawrence was mistaken. In one way he had known Madeleine Leicester longer than he imagined.

CHAPTER III

MAJOR WHITE had paid a yearly visit to Viareggio since he had left the army nearly a quarter of a century before. The particular complaint with which the Indian service had dismissed him was asthma; and the pine woods and sea air of the little Tuscan village gave him the only relief he could hope to find.

As a visitor of such long standing, the Major was known to every one in the place. He was welcomed, as the first butterfly of the spring is welcomed, by the hotel proprietors and shopkeepers; and, being a good-natured soul, he used his privilege of an old *habitué* to introduce new arrivals to one another, to point out all the objects of interest, and to make himself generally useful and obliging.

He was not long in forming the acquaintance of the small party in whom Lawrence Ensor had been interested on the first evening

of their arrival ; and Mr. Walters and he very soon became great friends. Mr. Walters in his younger days had travelled in many parts of the world familiar to the old Anglo-Indian, and they discovered several mutual acquaintances. In addition to this the old Englishman was a man of considerable scientific attainments, an interesting conversationalist, and, as it appeared, a great collector of curios. His main collection was, of course, stored at his home in England ; but a few of his more precious acquisitions he carried always about with him, unwilling to part from them, and the old Major and he spent many hours together in his room at the hotel examining these treasures, and comparing their individual knowledge ; for Major White himself had in his day been bitten with the collecting mania.

While the two old men were thus engaged, the women of their party would wander on the beach or in the Pineta, where it chanced that they were often met by Lawrence Ensor.

Ensor had taken care to give Miss Leicester an opportunity of acknowledging his slight service to her, by meeting her face to face in the hotel hall on the morning following their brief conversation ; but for some reason or other he had not ventured to be the first to

bow, and as her dark eyes passed him over calmly on this occasion, as if unconscious of his presence, he decided that it was necessary to obtain a regular introduction before attempting to improve his short acquaintance with her.

He was already on good terms with Major White, and when that good-natured gentleman caught him one morning leaning far out over the hotel balcony in the attempt to follow with his eyes the figures of Miss Leicester and her young companion making for their early stroll, he kindly offered him the opportunity he sought.

"Pretty little girl, that," said the Major, laying a restraining hand on Lawrence's back, which hung perilously over the wooden rail.

Lawrence drew back quickly, with a little laugh. "Very," he said calmly.

The Major, who had been dangerously near winking, after a glance at Lawrence's calm face, changed his plan of attack.

"The other's a handsome girl too," he said quickly, "the companion—Miss Leicester—I mean. Very handsome girl, very clever girl, too; speaks Italian, Russian, German. She's a great deal too good for a companion. Poor girl! family troubles, I suppose. Fortunately, she's got into good hands. Fine old

man, Walters, well read, well travelled ; and a sweet little girl, Miss Lucy. She's the grand-daughter, you know. She'll be very rich when the old man dies. He has a collection of Ashantee curios alone that he has been offered fifty thousand pounds for."

"Miss Leicester is the companion ?" asked Lawrence.

"Yes, Miss Lucy's companion. But I think the arrangement is more a friendly than a business one. They met at Montreux or somewhere, and the girls became friendly. Miss Leicester is, I should say, poor, and that is how it happened, I suppose. What do you say to a stroll ? I dare say we shall meet them on the beach. I shall be pleased to introduce you, if you care to know them. I think you said your father was in the 14th. Yes, yes, I remember his name—Colonel Ensor. He was a friend of an old friend of mine ; a good soldier, I have heard. Ah, well, that was years ago."

And, chatting away, the Major and Lawrence made their way downstairs and out on to the beach, where Lawrence had the felicity of being presented in due form to Miss Lucy Walters and to *Miss Madeleine Leicester*.

Lawrence's swift-born interest in the dark and strange beauty, which had so fascinated

him on his first acquaintance with it, had not passed away as time went on. He had seen Miss Leicester many times since their meeting on the Molo, and his thoughts—idle, and, to a certain extent, impressionable as he was—had been a great deal occupied with her. It was therefore with something of a thrill that he at length found himself seated by her side and engaged in conversation with her. And yet, to tell the truth, the thrill of pleasure which he had at first experienced soon changed into one of disappointment. Indeed, had he not had in his memory that brief moment on the moonlit Molo when he had for a second seemed to see into her heart; had Major White's praises not still rung in his ears, Lawrence's infatuation must have died a sudden death and his future have been very different. For Miss Leicester was disappointing: there was no doubt of it.

What it was, however, which caused the disappointment, Lawrence could hardly say. Old Major White was a keen judge, and he had said that Miss Leicester was a clever girl, or Lawrence would have merely put her down in his own mind, bluntly, as a fool. Besides, on that first night when he had met her she had impressed him as being anything but that. However a girl does not usually sulk with a

man she has just been introduced to, and Lawrence had done nothing to offend Miss Leicester, yet——

Was it merely her natural manner, he wondered, casting a glance at her impassive face turned towards the sea, over whose distances her grey eyes wandered almost sullenly. “Yes” and “No,” and sometimes not even that : the coldness of the beautiful features that never permitted themselves to relax into a smile : a something of hard repulse, intangible yet always present, at all events made conversation rather difficult ; and Lawrence, chilled in spite of himself, gave up any further attempt, and turned to his neighbour on the other side — Miss Lucy.

This affair was very different. He met no sullenness, no forbidding chill here. Miss Lucy Walters, aged eighteen, pretty, laughing and frank, would have been capable of keeping half a dozen Lawrence Ensors and Major Whites going, and was quite willing to exercise her talents. Indeed, her views of life were so naive and eager, her speculations concerning individuals in the queer mixed crowd now besieging the “*Nettuno*” so gay and full of unaffected girlish humour, that Lawrence and she quickly became the best of friends,

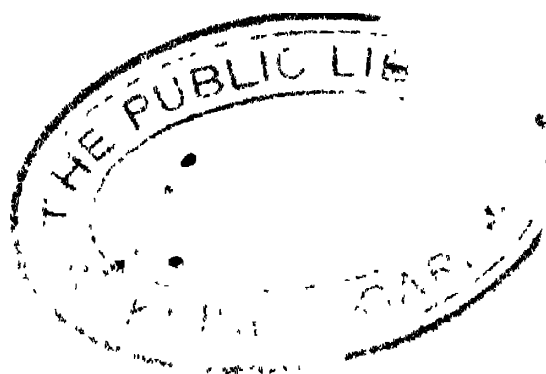
and contrived to keep the old Major laughing heartily.

Occasionally Lawrence glanced at Miss Leicester, almost involuntarily, driven to wonder what there could be in common between her and her vivacious young friend; but her face was always turned from them, and with her dark eyes still searching the calm sea, she sat silent and apparently unmindful of the laughter and chatter so near her. Strange as her manner was, however, it appeared that it was natural to her, for neither Lucy Walters nor the old Major took any notice of it or made any attempt to draw her into the conversation; and when at length the time came to return for lunch to the hotel, Lawrence remarked that she had not opened her lips since the last monosyllabic effort which had disheartened him.

"I don't know why I should mind," he thought, as he prepared himself for lunch. "Miss Lucy is evidently a dear little girl, and quite amusing enough to make me wish to stay here another month, and yet—I should like to see that beautiful Galatea come to life. That can't be her real self that she was this morning, though Miss Walters evidently thought that it was. I wonder who Pygmalion is—or was—*was*, I expect! Yes,

doubtless that's it. Any way, what does it matter to me ! ”

And having come to the satisfactory conclusion that it did not matter to him at all, Lawrence nevertheless went down to lunch with a clouded brow and an inexplicable pang at his heart.



CHAPTER IV

I, LAWRENCE ENSOR, have discovered that I am an ass. Yes, I am an ass. The fact that a large proportion of my fellow-creatures are in the same predicament (whether they know it or not) does not tend to lessen the shock of my discovery. . . . As a matter of fact, is it a discovery at all? As a matter of fact, haven't I often made an ass of myself before, and known it? Yes, but then I have never been *such* an ass.

When I was struggling along as a briefless and what is worse, a penniless barrister, I always felt that the only thing needed to make life a complete success for me was money. I used to put the amount at five hundred a year—in consols. To me, blind, in those days (only a few months ago) that five hundred a year seemed the one thing which would certainly smooth every obstacle from my path, and lay it open to all my plans and ambitions. I didn't see what could stop me. I see now.

Yes, I am, and I was, an ass. I have been at Viareggio six weeks ; and it seems probable that I shall stop here through the season, for it is likely that Mr. Walters and his party will stop too. At first sight, indeed, why should I not stay on ? I like old Walters. He is a fine, well-read, agreeable, intelligent old gentleman. I like Miss Lucy. She is everything that is charming in English girlhood ; and we are the best of friends. I don't know when I have liked a girl so much. I like—no ! that is where the mistake comes in—I do *not* like, I *love*, Madeleine Leicester.

What an ass I am ! Were there not hundreds of other girls to fall in love with ? Why, if it comes to that, need I fall in love at all ? I was happy, free and independent for the first time in my life : at liberty to go where I would, do what I wished. And now I—now I am hopelessly, madly, in love with a woman who thinks of me, cares as much for me, as if I were the Grand Lama of Thibet, or the Man in the Moon, or——*Does she ?* That is just it : that is where my folly shows itself—in that doubt that comes sometimes, that wild hope which makes my heart beat faster. Cold as she is, impassive, almost sullen—Heaven help me ! there are moments

when it almost seems not too mad to fancy she might soften and——

Those moments never come when I am alone with her. It is only when Lucy is present that she changes. She is fond of Lucy, that is very plain ; and sometimes, under the influence of the young girl's gaiety and laughing ways, she softens and smiles even on me.

• But her eyes never smile, I notice. Rarely, very rarely, they have met mine ; and in them on those occasions there has been such a depth of sadness, such a pathetic, imploring look, that I have always been forced to drop mine, or do what I feel I should bitterly regret—blurt out the burning words which hover on my lips.

Yes, I should regret it, I know I should.

There is some mystery about this woman, which I doubt if I shall ever solve. There is some barrier between her and the every-day world of love and life. And, though sometimes those deep grey eyes rest on me with a look almost kind, almost as if they guessed my feelings and did not repulse them, still, always, a chill at my heart, in spite of myself, seems to tell me that that barrier is there, and even that it is impassable.

CHAPTER V . .

“ AN impassable barrier ” ! I almost laugh as I read over the words with which the last chapter closes. Impassable ? for me, yes, doubtless : but for others ?

Lucy Walters came to me one morning on the Nettuno. It was too hot to bathe, or something ; and I was sitting watching the swimmers, myself one of a mixed crowd of English, Germans and Italians who were either seated, or who paced up and down the little wooden pier. Lucy and I are friends, and I quiz her about her admirers, officers chiefly, victims merely to the rather freely scattered glances of her laughing blue eyes, however, for Mr. Walters has made no acquaintances but myself and Major White, and Lucy's admirers had to be content with ogling.

This morning, however, I noticed that the crowd interested her less than usual. Her replies to my sallies were a little distracted.

Her eyes bubbled over with suppressed intelligence. I saw that she had news.

"Miss Lucy," I said at last, "your admirers are having a bad time of it this morning. You are snubbing them shamefully. See how they are drooping under the treatment. Is it possible that blue cloaks and black eyes are beginning to pall on you? Cast a glance on those two uniforms over there and tell me in confidence what you think of them."

Lucy looked, and turned her laughing eyes again to me. "No, they do not pall," she said; "they never could. Italian officers are too lovely for words. I adore them, but—— Have you seen our new French Master?"

"Your new French Master? No. I didn't even know you had an old one. Where is he? and who is 'us,' and why are you learning French?"

Lucy laughed. "'Us' is, or are, me—I mean I (do help me, Mr. Ensor!) and Madeleine. He is at the hotel now. And we are learning French, or at least I am, because grandpa wishes it."

"I thought Miss Leicester spoke French," I said.

"Not very well, I think. Not well enough to teach it, at least."

“ Ah ! Well, I have not seen this master of yours yet. Tell me about him. Is he amiable ? ”

Lucy drew a long breath, expressive of ecstasy. “ He is too handsome for words.”

“ I thought that was what the Italian officers were—but no, they were ‘ lovely,’ I remember.”

Miss Lucy looked across to where some blue-cloaked figures stood in graceful attitudes against the rails. “ Yes, they are lovely,” she said thoughtfully. “ But he—the French Master (he is not French—I think he is Russian or Polish), he is more beautiful than all of those put together. But it is almost lunch time. He will be at the hotel. Why not come and see him ? ”

I laughed, and we made our way back to the hotel.

Even in these days, at the theatre, doesn't farce sometimes precede tragedy ?

As we arrived at the hotel we met Miss Leicester. She had evidently been for a solitary walk, and was returning, looking rather fagged out, I thought, from the heat of the Italian noonday. She did not see us until we were almost upon her ; she was walking slowly, with her dark eyes fixed in thought upon the ground.

When she looked up at last, startled by our proximity, she smiled affectionately at Lucy, and cast a quick glance at me. Was there a deeper meaning in that flash of the dark grey eyes than I noticed at the time, or has my memory, influenced by what has passed since, invented one. I cannot tell.

My heart sickens at writing what I must write to tell the story which follows that morning's walk with Lucy. When I write of Madeleine Leicester, her proud dark face rises up before me, and tells me suspicion is impossible, incredible—and yet, when one comes to think what history tells us women have been, when one remembers what experience has taught us they can be, it all seems likely enough.

Lucy took Miss Leicester's arm, in the hall, laughingly drawing her forward, and whispering, as I could tell by a word caught here and there, about the new French Master. Miss Leicester had apparently yet to meet this paragon, and Miss Lucy was telling her wonders about him.

He had been, it appeared, very well recommended to her grandfather. They had made his acquaintance that morning, when he had called by appointment upon Mr. Walters, having sent in his letters on the previous day. His manners had been so charming, he was

altogether such a superior person, that Mr. Walters had engaged him on the spot to give lessons to his grand-daughter. (Mr. Walters apparently intended residing some time in Paris, where he had relations, and where Miss Lucy was "debuter.") Miss Leicester was to participate in these lessons, it appeared, as watchdog probably. Watchdog!! Ah, well!

The French Master was not, as it happened, at the hotel when we got there. But his lessons were to commence at once, and he came that afternoon. We were all seated on the verandah when he arrived—Mr. Walters, Lucy, Miss Leicester, Major White and I—and so I chanced to be present at his introduction to the Companion.

She gave no sign. I swear she gave no sign. He was the handsomest man I have ever seen, and taken with some foolish, boyish feeling of jealousy to see how she would meet him, I was watching her face. She neither changed colour nor expression. She met him as she had met me, with a cold inclination of her dark head, and that almost sullen, indifferent glance with which she seems to meet the gaze of all the world but Lucy Walters.

And it was all acting. She knew him all the time! I have thought so since, and I

have doubted it since. God help me, I *know* it now.

This French master's name is Riga ; and it seems to me that that name, like its owner, might come from any one of several different countries. But, take it all together, I should say that he was born in England, of foreign parents, probably Polish or Russian. He is, at least, a complete master of the French which he professes to teach.

I have said that he is the handsomest man I have ever seen, but I hardly know how to give the reasons which make me say so. A woman might do it easily enough. His description, as I can write it, might do for any one of a thousand men taken at random in any of the great Italian cities. He is tall, dark, and well made. His hair is cut very short, showing a rather exceptionally high forehead. He has an aquiline nose, very finely drawn eyebrows, a black moustache turned fiercely upwards towards his cheeks, and what women would call "very good eyes." Independent of their "goodness," they strike me as being capable of a great deal of penetration, but generally they seem merely watchful—cautiously watchful.

I believe the man to be a scoundrel, but I am doubtless prejudiced (perhaps every man

thinks the man who is preferred to himself is a scoundrel) ; but I must confess that very few people, probably no woman, would declare against him at first sight. Should I have done so had I not seen what I did ?

Riga was so unlike one's idea of a French master : his manner was so good, he was so evidently a man of the world and a gentleman, that for some time the object of his appearance on the hotel verandah was completely forgotten, and we all sat chatting together on various subjects. It was he himself who first reminded us of the object of his presence there, and requested Mr. Walters to say where he would like the day's lesson to take place.

Looking back now, I can see all sorts of meanings in the glance and little bow with which he drew back and motioned Miss Leicester past him to lead the way to the room which the proprietor suggested for the lesson. I can even fancy a hot flush rising to *her* pale cheek as she glided forward, her eyes bent on the ground. But it can be only fancy, I know ; for certainly I noticed nothing at the time.

It was not until the evening that the first hint came to me.

After dinner I had felt disinclined for my

usual stroll with Major White, and I had lazily thrown myself down on a sofa in a little smoking-room on the first floor of the hotel. In front of this room runs a broad verandah, on to which open all the windows on that story. It had grown dusk, but there was no light in my room. One of the hotel servants had come in to arrange the lamp, but seeing me stretched out on the couch with my eyes closed, he had gone out again, thoughtfully leaving me undisturbed.

After a time I heard the window of the next room—a drawing-room—open, and some one pass out on to the verandah. The next moment a second person followed hastily, and I heard a man's voice say eagerly, "Madeleine!"

Innocent of any intention to listen, yet almost involuntarily, I sprang to my feet. "Madeleine?" What did it mean?

"Are you mad?" I heard *her* voice reply. "Can you forget! I tell you, as I told you just now, that never, willingly, will I hear your voice, or see your face again. Leave me if you are wise. Go!"

I heard a quick murmur of expostulation, entreaty, I know not what. And then the door into my room from the verandah was flung swiftly open, and a tall dark figure

swept past me. I heard the inner door bang, and I was alone. She had not seen me.

For a second I stood still bewildered. I could hear a muttered oath outside, and an uncertain step approach the door ; then it turned, without entering, and I heard it pass through the drawing-room and descend the stairs. As I walked to the verandah and looked over into the dusk, I could faintly distinguish a tall masculine figure which made its way along the front.

I felt my brain reel as I fancied I recognised in this figure the French Master, Riga, whom I had seen introduced to Miss Leicester *only that morning*.

CHAPTER VI

It may have been foolish of me, but I spent a wretched night after the evening when I chanced to overhear that strange conversation between Riga and Miss Leicester.

Yet, after all, why should I call it foolish ? I was in love with *her*—deeply, irrevocably in love. I had placed her on a pedestal in my mind—beautiful, sad, mysterious, holy—and she had seemed to fall from it. If she *had* fallen—and how could it be otherwise, granted my eyes had not played me false—how horrible it all was !

That she should be addressed as “ Madeleine ” by this man ; that they should seem to have quarrelled ; that she should forbid him to see her or speak to her again—that was nothing, or little, save to me, myself. But that she should meet him—he whom she must have known so well—as she had met that man, as an utter stranger ; that she

should act a part before us all, and see him afterwards in the dusk, alone ; that she should permit Lucy's innocent talk of him, and deceive both her friend and her kind benefactor Walters—that all seemed horrible to me.

She was herself in the morning when I saw her again—pale, silent, and sad ; but not paler or more silent than I had seen her before.

I waited for some sign from her when Riga should be mentioned, as I knew he would be ; but she gave no sign. She was calm and indifferent, as she had been when she had met him, as we thought, for the first time. I watched her face as Lucy chatted laughingly of him ; and she acted well—so well that even *I* began to doubt, and to fancy almost that I had mistaken Riga's figure, and that it had not been him that I had seen leaving the hotel that night.

I was soon to be undeceived. I had been for a bathe in the cool of the late afternoon, and returning to the hotel about dinner time, I found the downstairs rooms apparently deserted, and no one about. Looking round the hotel in the hope of coming across the Major and having a smoke with him before dinner, I accidentally found my way into the small sitting-room which had been engaged

for the purpose of Lucy Walters' lessons in French.

It was rather a dim apartment at the rear of the hotel, furnished in a style which showed that it was used more by the proprietor of the place and his family than by stray visitors. It contained an old piano, apparently very much out of repair, a table covered with a cheap baize cloth, and a few shabby chairs.

On the table stood an inkstand and writing materials, and a few loose sheets of scribbling paper, still scattered about, showed that one of Mr. Riga's lessons had taken place that afternoon.

I carelessly picked up one of the papers and glanced at it. Miss Lucy, as it appeared, was still in trouble with the irregular verbs. I recognized her bold scrawl, which I had seen before. Other of the sheets bore writing in different hands, evidently Riga's and Miss Leicester's.

With a little thrill I examined them more closely ; but at first I was unable to decide which was which. It was difficult to say of either of them, this is a man's writing, or this a woman's. I am a little sceptical concerning the theories of messieurs les graphologists ; but it interested me to try to decide in this case which was Madeleine Leicester's

hand ; and the papers being, at the first glance, evidently not of a private nature, I set myself to the task.

I was still puzzling, when I noticed that the subject of the writing in both cases was probably a piece of dictation ; but that while, in one instance, the page was untouched, in the other the French had been corrected slightly here and there. The hand which had written the first page, and added the few corrections to the second, must be the professor's.

I turned to Madeleine Leicester's paper with a sigh. This, then, was her writing ! How, a few hours before, I should have treasured that piece of paper on which her hand had rested, and thought myself happy to possess it. Even now, as I saw her, in my mind's eye, bending her dark head over the lines, did not my heart refuse to receive the unworthy suspicions of the previous day, and beat faster as I wondered if ever she would write to *me*—if ever——

My sentimentality at this point, however, received a sudden shock. As my eyes travelled carelessly over the paper before me, I started, and then flung it down in anger, cursing myself for my foolish dreams. For I had noticed suddenly what had missed my

eyes before. Here and there in the dictation a few words were faintly underlined ; and these words, if placed together, made sentences.

It was a careless glance which had made me first think this : a closer examination assured me of the fact.

Almost fiercely, forgetting for a moment what I was doing, I took my pencil and transcribed the words into my pocket-book. When I had written down each of the underlined syllables, I ground my teeth, and, wrenching the leaf from my book, and tearing it into pieces, I made my way disconsolately to my room to dress for dinner.

It was so—I was right, I vowed ; she was unworthy, and henceforth I would cast all thoughts of her from me. Nevertheless as I sat at dinner, silent and distraught, and afterwards, half through the evening, those tormenting sentences rang in my brain, danced before my eyes, and refused to be forgotten. “ *Ce soir—a neuf heures—n’oubliez pas—près de la gare—plus de bêtises, mon ami—ou je . . .* ”

That was all. The sentence stopped there ; but it was enough. And this was the man to whom she had been “ introduced ” the day before—the man who could write to her like

this. I felt my blood rise as I read between the words the combined familiarity and brutality of the writer. "To-night at nine—near the station—don't forget—no more foolery, my friend—or I——" "Or I——" what? What was the threat which it was in his power to use, and which he dared to hold over her?

I wandered out alone after dinner with a cigar to keep me company, and my thoughts, which were anything but pleasant. What was I to do under the circumstances, I wondered. The evening was cold and depressing, and Viareggio seemed to have lost its pleasure for me. The appearance of this man, and the discoveries I had made, were likely, I thought, to break up our pleasant little party. Could I stay on and tear my heart by watching those two, seeing still more, finding that she, who, to me, had seemed so distant, so unapproachable, to this man was—what?

Another thought which troubled me entered my mind at this stage. Knowing what I knew, was she — Miss Leicester — a fit companion for pretty little innocent Lucy Walters? Should I be acting honestly in leaving Viareggio and allowing Mr. Walters to remain in the dark concerning his granddaughter's companion. Was a woman who

had acted such a part as Miss Leicester had acted, and *was* acting, to be trusted with a young girl—a woman who could carry on a secret correspondence thus—who could make secret assignments ?

And then I flushed suddenly. Was not my anger against this man Riga, my jealousy (for I felt that jealousy spurred me on), carrying me too fast ? After all, what was it that I knew ? Whatever there may have been between those two, had I not heard her, Madeleine, tell him she would see him, would speak to him no more ? Had I not heard the bitterness, the contempt of her tones, as she bade him leave her ? Why—in this last case at least—might she not be innocent ? He, evidently, had underlined those words : he had asked *her* to meet him. Could she help that ? And then came another question : *Would she go ?*

For an hour or more I wandered about the village, and then I looked at my watch. It was half-past eight. The station stood a little outside the town. I should have time to reach it before nine. Should I go myself to the place of meeting and know the answer to the question ? and how could I excuse myself if I did ?

Alas ! there is no deceit too great for a lover

to practise upon himself. I had discovered this assignation by perfectly unlawful means, I knew, and nothing could excuse me for thus playing the spy ; yet I turned my face towards the station, and set out unblushingly, convinced by my own weak reasoning.

If she should not come, if my last faint hope in her were not to be shattered, then I should at least be certain that this man had no further hold over her, and I could leave Viareggio without betraying her to her friends—for who was I to judge her past ? If she came ? . . . Well, heaven send she would not come ! And so I reasoned.

I had not long to endure the torments of doubt. The station stood in a green square surrounded by fig trees and oleanders. The front was lighted brightly, for it was now quite dark. On the steps leading to the booking office stood Riga, the French Master ; and as I watched his tall figure, from the darkness of the trees, I saw Madeleine Leicester walk up to him, and they turned into the building together.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER breakfast, which I had early and alone, I set off the next morning for a walk along the shore in the direction of Massa, avoiding Lucy Walters, who was preparing for her morning on the *Nettuno*, and escaping from the Major, whom I heard searching asthmatically for me in the smoking-room.

I intended to leave Viareggio that afternoon, giving as an excuse for my hurried departure some business affair in England. But I wished before going to decide what it was best for me to do regarding Mr. Walters and his grand-daughter's companion, and for that reason I wanted to spend the morning alone.

The sun had not yet risen very high in the heavens, and the air was cool and beautiful. The sea was calm and almost a deeper blue than the sky itself. Only a few children were about on the beach, gathering chestnuts which

had been swept down into the sea by the river in flood, and washed up again on to the beach by the gentle swell. The sand made good walking, being firm and hard, and I had gone a good many miles before I felt inclined to turn back and face the hotel party at lunch.

Yet I had come to no decision. How could I betray this woman who only yesterday had been so dear to me, who was still so dear? Major White had told me she was poor, I remembered; what right had I to wreck her life, and turn her out on to the world, alone, helpless, in the power of that man?

A voice at my side made me start suddenly and turn pale. I had been walking alone, flicking at the shells and seaweed with my stick, my eyes on the ground and my thoughts engrossed, and I had not imagined that any one was near me. Any voice would have startled me at that moment—how much more the one that had spoken. Deep, low, and sad, how well I knew it—how often it had thrilled my heart—how it thrilled it still! I turned slowly. Madeleine Leicester stood at my side, looking at me.

I have said somewhere that it was but seldom she allowed her eyes to meet mine, and that when she did their expression was such that they affected me almost beyond my

power of self-control. I lost my self-control then. I stood looking at her helplessly like a child caught in some act of wrong, and reddening with a sudden feeling of shame. Those deep grey solemn unfathomable eyes, how I loved them! How could I look at them and think her unworthy, I wondered; how could I have ever looked at them and afterwards have doubted her—or had I forgotten them, it was so rarely they had met mine.

And then I remembered the station the night before.

She did not bow or say Good day, but her fingers touched my arm lightly. "Will you sit down here for a moment?" she said in a low tired voice. "I have something I want to say to you."

I hesitated for a second, hardly knowing what I did; and then I obeyed her, seating myself on the sand, without a word.

After a moment's silence, during which we both looked out to sea, she turned to me suddenly and almost fiercely. Her voice had lost its little weary tone, and she spoke quickly and harshly.

"Mr. Ensor, you suspect me," she said. "It is useless to deny it. I can see you do. I know it."

I remained dumb, overwhelmed with sur-

prise. Indeed, what could I say? And, with a little bitter smile, she went on.

“ You are too honest to lie,” she said. “ It is because you are honest that I am going to speak to you. You discovered yesterday that Monsieur Riga, the French Master, had asked me for an assignation. He did it by underlining some words in a piece of dictation. I remembered when it was too late that this dictation had been left in the room where Lucy and I had been working. When I reached the room I noticed that the papers had been disturbed. On the floor were some scraps of torn letters. There was enough left to assure me that the words Monsieur Riga had underlined had been copied by some one. It was you, Mr. Ensor, who copied them. I have seen letters addressed by you in the same handwriting. You are surprised? Oh, I have had a life which makes all this easy to me. I saw you going to the station last night. I was only a little way behind you. All this is understood—don’t say anything, please. I will leave here. Knowing what you know—and knowing only that—you would think it necessary I should, I am sure. Will you give me a week, Mr. Ensor? ”

“ Miss Leicester——” I began, confused.
“ I really don’t——”

She interrupted me ruthlessly. "Will you give me a week before you speak to Mr. Walters and tell him what you have seen? You will tell him, I know. In your place I should do so. Will you give me a week?"

"But, Miss Leicester——" I began again.

"Yes or no?" she said quietly.

"Yes," I replied.

"And, Mr. Ensor," she continued,—and this time her voice was not so firm, "will you—could you contrive that Lucy thinks—that Lucy—I am so fond of her." She had broken down. "God help me, she is the only person in the world who cares for me."

I swung myself round on to my knees, and caught her hand quickly. My resolutions, my suspicions were all forgotten. I only knew that she was in distress—that *she* was begging a favour—and such a poor little favour—from me.

"Madeleine!" I cried, "what is all this? What a fool I have been to distrust you! And yet—— Listen, Madeleine; tell me, for God's sake, what it means, or I shall go mad. Tell me! You see how I love you—you see what power you have over me. Tell me lies—lies, if you can tell me nothing else—but only make me believe in you again——"

I stopped, for she was staring at me in surprise, even while the blushes covered her cheeks.

“You!” she murmured. “Oh, I never thought. I never suspected——”

“I had taken her hand again, and was about to speak, when she stopped me. For a moment she remained in thought, and then spoke as if she had decided quickly.

“Before you say more, let me tell you my story,” she said; and then broke off suddenly, looking up with a start.

I followed the direction of her eyes, and then I understood. Behind us stood Monsieur Riga, the French Master, pale with rage, and his hands clenching and unclenching themselves furiously.

Madeleine had risen to her feet, and, a little confused, I had followed her example. For a second the three of us stood staring at one another. Riga was the first to speak.

“Come back to Viareggio, Madeleine,” he said, in a voice that was hoarse with anger or excitement. “I want you.” His tone was a command, and his insolence angered me; but the rage and excitement in his face kept me outwardly cool in spite of my feelings. I turned my back on him, and faced Madeleine.

“ You say you have something to tell me ? ”
I said quietly. “ Tell me now.”

My coolness maddened Riga, who had apparently lost all control of his feelings. He started wildly forward, and seizing my arms from behind, he attempted to force me aside. I was more powerful than he, but he had me at a disadvantage, and for a moment we struggled fruitlessly.

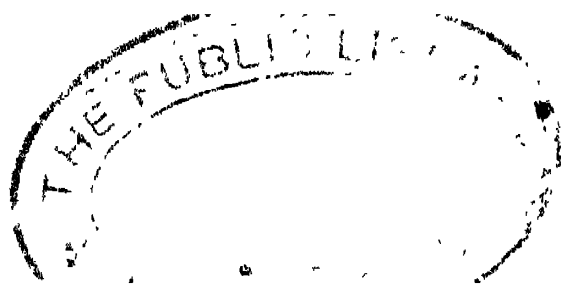
Then suddenly, almost involuntarily, I dropped my arms and stood staring helplessly at Madeleine. She had turned deadly pale, and was looking at me with an expression in which horror was mingled with an evident struggle for recollection. As if some sudden and weird power had been given to me to see into her brain, I read her thoughts: “ Where and under what terrible circumstances had this scene been acted before ? ” And my own brain, dazzled, caught the wonder and repeated it. “ Where and under what circumstances had I felt those arms which strove to tear me away—where and under what circumstances had I seen that pale, dark face which stared with horror in its eyes——”

My God ! I remembered now. That night in the fog. “ Murderess ! Now are you glad ! ” —the bitter words rang in my ears. I saw the face of the beautiful dying girl convulsed

with pain ; I saw the seats of the brougham under the red light, stained with crimson blood ; I saw the woman, holding the lamp, bend over the stricken figure and tried to staunch the wound ; I felt myself seized, almost before I had time to see, and flung aside, while the brougham drove off with its ghastly burden——

I gave a glance at Madeleine Leicester's face ; and, seeing in her dark, wild eyes the confirmation of my thoughts, feeling her quick realization of my knowledge, I flung myself down on the sand, and buried my dazed head in my hands. " Murderess ! Murderess ! " What did it all mean ! what did it mean ?

When I looked up again, Riga and Miss Leicester were gone, and I was alone on the beach.



CHAPTER VIII

YES, what did it mean ? My God, what did it mean ?

Madeleine Leicester a murderess ? Impossible ! And yet how could it be otherwise ? *She* was the woman I had seen with the lamp that night in the fog—the woman who had tried to staunch with trembling fingers the wound which she had given—the woman I had heard addressed as “ Murderess ” by the murdered woman herself !

For I was certain now of this. That strange scene on the beach had brought it all back so vividly—that crime which had almost passed from my memory in the midst of the enjoyment of my new life, which *would* have passed entirely, perhaps, but that it had been so strangely recalled.

It began to appear as if my meeting with *her* and my sudden recognition of her had been some miracle, some mysterious sudden

judgement. For, in truth, I might, but for that strange scene with Riga, have met her a thousand times—as I *had* a hundred—and never have known her. I had been so confused, so struck with horror on that terrible night: I had had so little time—it had all happened so quickly, and my attention had been so fixed by the beauty and pathos of the dying girl—that I had hardly noticed this other woman before I was hurled from the brougham door.

Yet it seemed that, unknown to myself, her face had been printed on my brain—pale, terror-stricken as it was—and when the time had come I had known it again.

And Riga? Was it possible that the scene on the beach had indeed been almost a complete repetition of that other tragedy? That touch of the sinewy hands seizing me from behind and striving to force me away—it was that touch which had first flashed this light on my brain and made me glance at *her*. Were those hands indeed the hands which had seized me in the fog; and was Riga Madeleine Leicester's accomplice?

How probable, how fearfully likely, it all seemed! How that would explain the meeting of those two, their quarrel, his threats! I trembled as I realized the inexorable certainty

of it all. Silent, gloomy, melancholy—no wonder ! For what was in her thoughts ?

Was ever man who loved a woman so terribly undeceived, I wondered ; and how swiftly the shocks had followed one another ! “ Tell me lies—only let me believe in you again,” I remembered my words, words spoken as I held her hand, and looked into her face, into her pure sad eyes. Pure ? Good heavens ! With a groan I shut the image from my mind, and rising, began to walk hastily away from the spot where we had met. I took the opposite direction to Viareggio, half running in my confusion. I dared not think of her, I dared not meet her again just then. I was afraid—afraid of my own weakness—afraid to meet the gaze of those eyes which had so blinded me, which, Heaven help me ! I feared would blind me still.

When I reached Massa—by, God knows, what roundabout road—it was already late in the afternoon.

I made my way confusedly to the nearest Albergo, and putting aside the anxious inquiries of the head waiter, who remarked my haggard appearance, I asked to be shown at once to a private room, where I spent an hour or so in trying to pull myself together. All my attempts were useless, however, and I

sought my bedroom early worn out with fatigue and anxiety.

Alas! my bed brought me less relief than I had found in pacing the little sitting-room, and staring blankly at the photographs of Garibaldi and Crispi which decked the walls. Sleep seemed determined not to come to me ; and when at last I did contrive to doze a little, it was only to be haunted by dreams worse than my wakeful thoughts.

Morning, nevertheless, as it does to every one, brought at least a clearer view of things. Whatever happened, I determined to try to exercise a little more self-control, to crush my feelings back into my heart, and probe all this mystery to the bottom. I would have certainty, I vowed, where now there was a doubt ; and to do that I must return to Viareggio. For in the night I had, to speak truth, hesitated even about that step. I had had thoughts of flying from the place, sending an address for my luggage, escaping from the terrible position in which I found myself, at any cost. That I did not do so, how thankful I have been since !

CHAPTER IX

WHEN I reached the hotel at Viareggio I approached it nervously, fearing to meet Madeleine Leicester or Riga on the steps or in the entrance, and scarcely knowing what I should do in such a case.

Fortunately, I could see no sign of either of them ; only Major White was to be observed walking up and down the verandah, apparently deep in thought. He started when he caught sight of me, and came forward to meet me, glancing curiously into my eyes. I could see that his thin sunburnt face wore rather an anxious look, and his hands trembled more than usual.

“ So you have come back, my young friend,” he said, clasping my hand. “ Good heavens ! we began to think that you had disappeared too.”

“ Disappeared ? Too ? ”

“ Yes—haven’t you heard ? But, of course you haven’t. Well, the world’s coming to an

end, my boy. Miss Leicester, that noble-looking girl—by Gad! I could have sworn she *was* a noble girl too—has gone—run away. And the French Master—that fellow Riga (I never liked him!)—he's gone. They've gone together, in short. There's not a doubt of it."

"Gone! gone with Riga!" I gasped.

"Ay, gone! And, what's worse, they haven't been content with merely going. Walters' Gusi—one of those Ashantee jars, worth, Lord knows what — has gone with them."

"Stolen? Good heavens, you must be mistaken!" I cried.

Major White shook his head solemnly. "There is small chance of that, I fear; though, really, Ensor, I can hardly think that girl is guilty. It was the man, probably, and perhaps she didn't know."

"Tell me what has happened," I gasped, feeling the ground sink under my feet.

"Well, this is all we know for certain. This fellow Riga came to give his lesson yesterday as usual. You were away, you know. It seems, instead of leaving when the lesson was over, he took a bedroom in the hotel, making some excuse or other, and staying the night, or, at least, part of the night. Walters is a

poor sleeper, and he fancied he heard a noise in his room during the evening ; but he took little notice of it, it appears, at the time. In the morning the Gusi's gone—so's Miss Leicester—so's Riga. A little line of apology from Miss Leicester to Mr. Walters arrives later—she thanks him for all his goodness, but she has to go. That is all. Nothing from Riga—nothing about the Gusi, naturally. Cool, isn't it ? ”

“ Good heavens ! ” I repeated blankly, attempting in vain to collect my thoughts. Madeleine gone with Riga ? Well, bad as that was, after yesterday I could at least comprehend it. But a thief—she ? That at all events was impossible. Nevertheless, I knew not what to say, or think.

Fortunately, at that moment Lucy Walters made her appearance on the verandah, and relieved me. She was looking pale, I noticed, and her eyes bore traces of tears. She talked indifferently for a moment or so, and then made me a little sign that she wished to speak to me. We contrived after a time to separate ourselves from the old Major, who still paced the verandah irresolutely ; and we made our way on to the beach.

“ You have heard ? ” asked Lucy, when at length we found ourselves out of hearing.

"Yes," I said. "I think so."

"Isn't it terrible, Mr. Ensor!" cried poor Lucy, almost weeping again. "Poor, poor Madeleine! Do you know I always had a strange idea that that man hated her, and that she feared him—and now she has gone—run away. Oh, I am sure it is his fault."

I stared. This was a new view of the case. Lucy, at least, did not take the Major's view of things.

Lucy went on. "And grandpa's vase—the Gusi—he was so proud of it! And they pretend to think Madeleine was in league with that man—that she took it! Madeleine!"

"But *you* don't?" I said.

"I? Mr. Ensor! Do *you*? How could she! Madeleine steal! Why, I know she is innocent. Listen, Mr. Ensor, I think you thought well of her—you admired her—how could any one help doing so! I will show you something. I haven't shown it to any one else." She produced a little sheet of paper from her pocket, and handed it to me. I took it in silence.

"Good-bye, Lucy, darling Lucy, good-bye," the note ran. "I must leave you. I must go from here at once. Don't ask why—I cannot tell you. It is the secret of my unhappy life, and you are not fit to hear it. Think well

of me, Lucy. I was so fond of you, dear. Thank you for all your dear kindness. Lucy, don't think badly of me ! Whatever you hear—whatever they say, trust me. Perhaps some day we shall meet again—if not, forget your unhappy Madeleine."

• That was all ; but I gave a little gasp of relief as I read the lines. She was not guilty of this last misery at least. She was no thief. And then I turned sick again. For was not this theft a small thing when I remembered that other crime with which she had been connected.

I comforted Lucy Walters as best I could ; and before I returned to the hotel I heard one piece of news which relieved me a little : Mr. Walters had refused to take any steps to recover the stolen vase, and Madeleine, guilty or not guilty, was free from pursuit.

* * * * *

That evening when I was seated in the smoking-room alone, one of the under-waiters handed me a little sealed packet, saying, with a meaning smile, that La Signorina had asked him to deliver it into my own hands. The matter of the lost Gusi, and the sudden departure of Miss Leicester and the French Master had not been mentioned outside our own little circle, but doubtless the man—

Italian-like—suspected a love affair, and I tipped him, telling him not to mention the delivery of the letter, instructions he effusively promised to obey. When he had gone I looked at the little packet eagerly. It was addressed to me in the handwriting I now knew to be Miss Leicester's, and I felt my heart beat fast as I saw that it enclosed a long letter or manuscript in the same hand.

Hiding it hastily in my pocket, I hurried up to my own room to read it undisturbed. "Let me tell you my story." The words, which the sudden appearance of Riga had cut short on the beach on the previous day, recurred to me. What was this letter? *Was* it her story; and what was I going to learn? In spite of my eagerness, I trembled, and almost hesitated to read it.

CHAPTER X

MADELEINE'S LETTER

“ You will be surprised to receive this—surprised to hear from me, and at such length—but I must write ; I cannot help myself. And yet, were I not certain—were I not about to make it certain—that we should never meet again, I would die before my pen should touch the paper.

Then, if we are never to meet, why should I write ; why should I care what your opinion of me may be ? how can I even hope to make you think better of me by telling you my miserable story ? Ah ! I am a woman . . . !

You startled me on the beach yesterday. I never guessed—I never suspected ! I should never have let you speak, but you took me by surprise. Then, before you should go far enough to repent, before you should say what you would perhaps have cut your tongue out sooner than spoken (when you came to

look back) I stopped you. I would have told you my story. The love of an honest man (for what would you have said ?) is not for me.

I was interrupted. You remember by whom.

‘ My miserable story ’ ? That is what I wrote ? Yes, and of late, such a miserable life—such a wretched, miserable life ! The most terrible scene in that life was recalled to me by that incident yesterday—to me and to you too. I saw it in your eyes.

I never remembered to have seen you before. When I first met you here in Viareggio your face was strange to me as mine was to you. You remembered me yesterday ? It came, to you, as it did to me, from heaven ! That scene—that man holding you and trying to force you away—what did it recall to you and me ? I will tell you.

It is a foggy night in a London street. A carriage is standing in the roadway. Inside it lies a lovely girl, stabbed by a cruel knife. Her sweet face is pale as death, and the blood stains her dress and the brougham seats. Another girl, holding in her hands a lamp, tries with trembling fingers and heart that throbs sickeningly to staunch the wound. The dying girl’s eyes open, but there is hate instead of love in their wild gaze. Cruel, cruel words

burst from her lips. You heard those words—for you were looking on, weren't you?—those words which broke a heart. . . . Then a man comes swiftly round from the horse's head; he seizes you and pushes you aside; he springs to the box and flogs the horse. . . . Do you remember anything more? I do not—thank God, I do not! It was weeks before I heard anything, saw anything, felt anything, but those cruel, those bitter words. *They* followed me everywhere; they rang in my ears; they flamed before my eyes; they stabbed into my heart, as I . . . No! Oh, God, no! never *me* . . . as that knife stabbed into her heart.

Forgive me, I hardly know what I am writing. I will try from this to tell you clearly, briefly, however difficult it may be, what some impulse, which perhaps you will never understand, has made me wish that you should know.

My name is not Leicester—what it is matters little. My father was an Englishman, of a well-known family. He had in his youth married a Frenchwoman; and for many years he lived abroad. I and my sister—his only children—were born in Brittany. My sister was a year younger than myself. My mother died when I was three years old; and her

death broke my father's heart. I fancy it even affected his mind. At all events from that time he became strange, different, almost impossible. From being one of the kindest, most loving of parents, he grew hard, cold and reckless. He withdrew from all society but that in which it was impossible that he could meet any of his equals or former acquaintances.

Adèle and I grew up almost unnoticed, quite uncared for, by him. I do not mean that he treated us badly, or that we wanted anything due to our position. We had nurses of irreproachable character ; our servants were carefully chosen ; and, as we grew older, a governess was found for us—but that was all. We had no parent's love, no friends, no society, no one to speak to but our inferiors, and even those, either by intention or accident, were people who must inevitably have been unattractive or unsympathetic to children.

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that we became devoted to one another, worshipping each other, living with hardly a thought outside each other's happiness. I was older than Adèle—older even than the year that was between us, for my nature was unlike hers—and perhaps I spoiled her. How could I help doing so ? She was the loveliest

child I have ever seen : she became the most beautiful girl. She was very slender, fragile almost, with fair hair and dark eyes . . . but *you have seen her !* ah, you have seen her !

So we lived in this way for eighteen years. Eighteen years ! I am only nineteen—can you believe it ? In spite of our love for one another we were not happy. We lived in one of the gayest continental towns, and we were constantly travelling from our home to other cities—always those in which youth, gaiety and brightness might be met most frequently ; yet we knew no one, we were allowed to make no acquaintances. Our father's commands on this point were strict ; and we did not disobey them. What were his reasons ? I cannot tell. The result—endless misery, I know.

One day my father told us curtly that he wished us to study Russian ; he intended to winter in Petersburg ; and he wished us to be able to give the servants orders, find our way about, and so on. He had found a master to teach us, it appeared ; and we were to commence studying the language at once.

The master came the next day. We had always had governesses till then ; and we were naturally excited about this event, which was to us of great importance. I remember

Adèle saying that she was sure our master would be hideous, old, and wear spectacles. He came. You have seen him. He was Monsieur Riga.

You can imagine the effect such a man as he created in the minds of two girls brought up as we had been. Remember, we had never in our lives spoken to a young man of anything like our own position—never to a man at all, save our father and his banker, and a lawyer or two at different places where we stayed—all over middle-age and uninteresting. This man was handsome beyond words : he was a gentleman (of good family, my father condescended to tell us), and his manners were as good as those of foreigners of the better class can be.

Poor little Adèle—poor little darling ! How can I write what followed our meeting with that man !

She loved him, and I, I thought him the best of men. I saw what was going on ; I knew she loved him, for she told me so one day ; yet I did not stop it—I did nothing.

Monsieur Riga went to our father. He had courage, I must say that for him. He was repulsed with contempt. Adèle was ordered to keep to the house, and Riga was dismissed. Adèle was nearly heart-broken, and she flung herself on my love. How could I resist her ?

Indeed, at that time, it seemed to me, heaven help me ! why *should* I do so ? Our father had never tried to gain our love, or even our respect. The life he led, openly, forbade that we should look up to him. This man seemed to us all that was good and noble—his only fault that he was poor. Even if I had any last lingering scruples, Adèle's tears and misery vanquished them. We waited our opportunity, and Riga making all necessary preparations, we fled to England, where, as soon as it was possible, he and Adèle were married.

We were never pursued. My father was away at Monaco when we left. We had been living at Nice, and he often left us for a day or so. It seems he was a noted gambler (before my mother's death he had been one of the quietest of men). Lately, evidently, he had been losing large sums, and had determined to risk a last attempt at the Monte Carlo tables. He lost, and going into the gardens one night he shot himself. Through his lawyers, afterwards, we received the sum of two thousand pounds, which, it appeared, he had always put aside for us in case of such an ending to his life—an ending he had evidently anticipated. Apart from the curt communication of his death, and the receipt of this

money, we heard nothing more. He left no word of love or parting for us.

At the time of Adèle's marriage we, of course, knew nothing of this money, and Riga believed that we were heiresses. He had faith—as we ourselves had—in our father's relenting when he should hear of Adèle's marriage : and he was kindness itself. Indeed, even when he knew the truth, when he was aware that the two thousand pounds, sent us from abroad, was all we had, he did not at once show the dismay he must have felt.

In truth, I believe the man to have been such an utter adventurer, so careless and so reckless, that even that small sum appeared to him a godsend, and the future, when it should be spent, a matter for no immediate consideration. Besides this, he must have loved Adèle—he could not help but love her, his sweet wife, in the first days of their wedded life. A harder, crueller, more treacherous nature even than his *must* have been touched by her beauty and her loving ways. . . . Ah, Adèle, my darling, I can write no more of you at that time ; let me pass over a few months in silence.

That brief time was happy. Whatever happened after, *those* days were bright. We entered heart and soul, Adèle and I, into the

pleasures of the great capital. Riga was devoted, admiring, affectionate ; and he accompanied us everywhere. He explained our lavish expenditure (he would not hear, nor would Adèle, of my leaving them—and where too could I go ?) by referring constantly to a large fortune which he anticipated inheriting shortly : and we went to all those places where pleasure was to be sought.

Riga had many acquaintances, foreigners chiefly, to whom he introduced us, and who made themselves amiable to us : he took a handsome house in a good neighbourhood : Adèle had a little carriage of her own, servants in abundance, and her every wish gratified. We were too young, too utterly innocent of the world and society, to notice many things which would have made older and wiser heads doubt ; and we were happy.

Then came the end to the brief dream at last. That coward—that traitor—began to change towards Adèle ; he began to weary of her.

I saw it before she did—before even that terrible new suspicion came ; and I tried to keep *her* from seeing it.

Alas ! I soon found how impossible a task I had set myself. She knew it soon enough. Yet Riga was clever. Before me, he was

always as he had been to her at first, even when she knew he loved her no longer, and when he must have felt I had learned the truth from her. Ah, what cowards men are sometimes !

Adèle began to grow pale and unhappy ; and worse than all, she began to draw away from me, who would have given my life for her happiness. I could not understand this estrangement at first ; I put it down to her desire to shield her husband in my opinion—to her unhappiness—to ill-health—to any cause but the right one. Then at last I understood, and the knowledge stunned me, shocked me beyond words. . . .

I can scarcely write it, even now. A causeless—heaven help me—a baseless, utterly baseless, horrible doubt had arisen in her poor mind—a doubt of me. I have often wondered if, in reality—my father's life being such a strange one—insanity might not have been present in our family, and Adèle have inherited some curious twist of mind, some lurking remnant of that terrible disease. Otherwise, how to explain the cruel days which followed that happy first time ; how to explain her subsequent behaviour.

I cannot write all this fully, Mr. Ensor—yet, how to make you understand what I

would tell you ? It is all too horrible ! Adèle became jealous of me—me, her sister.

I have no doubt, looking back, that Riga encouraged her in this when he noticed it, for purposes of his own. At all events, from that time he openly neglected her, and began to pay attentions to me—attentions which I misunderstood at first ; which I refused to allow myself to believe in ; which I repulsed at last with all the contempt of which I was capable.

But I must shorten this part of my unhappy story.

When it became impossible for me to misunderstand Monsieur Riga any longer, I made my preparations for leaving Adèle. I should have done so at once, but I was weak ; and I yielded to the entreaties of Adèle not to desert her. She would be alone, she told me, among strangers, with a husband whose affection she felt she had lost, though she loved him passionately still—she could not bear it, she would die ! I yielded. Would that *I* had died before I was so weak ! Yet I dreaded, indeed, to leave her, poor little bird—alone in such a cage : and, torn in so many different ways, what was I to do ?

For a time things went on more happily, or at least more peacefully. Adèle seemed

to have forgotten her unhappy jealousy ; and her husband appeared to have conquered his growing coldness towards her. He and I never met alone, and we hardly ever spoke to one another.

One day—I shall never forget that day—Adele and her husband had had a wild, foolish quarrel. I know not what had 'caused it—though I suspected the old madness. They had become reconciled, however, and he had suggested our going to the theatre in the evening, a suggestion which Adèle received with delight, for we had been living very quietly of late.

The evening passed pleasantly enough, until the time came for us to return home. When we left the theatre we found that the streets were shrouded in the densest fog. There was some difficulty in finding carriages and cabs ; and a great many people decided to walk home rather than risk the dangers of a drive. As it happened, however, we ourselves chanced to discover our carriage almost at once—it was driven by the coachman, a compatriot of Riga, a man entirely devoted to him—and Adèle not being very strong, we decided that we would drive home rather than risk a long walk for her in the cold night air.

We went some distance in safety and com-

fort. Then, when we had left the busiest part of the city and approached the northern district where we lived, our coachman lost his road. For a time the man attempted to retrace his route, or to discover some familiar landmark ; but we were apparently in a deserted neighbourhood, and he at last desisted from further fruitless attempts.

He pulled up the horse and, descending from the box, he asked permission of his master to knock at some door near by, and to attempt to discover what street we had found our way to. Riga gave his consent, begged us not to be frightened, and descended from the carriage to attend to the horse.

The coachman was some time absent ; and after a little while Monsieur Riga came round to the window to speak to us. He chose my side. I let down the glass of the window, and as he approached he seized my hand, and attempted to kiss me. . . .

I cannot tell to this day whether in the darkness he had thought it was Adèle. I tore my hand away and he gave a short laugh. While that laugh still rang in my ears, I heard a strange wild cry behind me, and turning round, I noticed that Adèle had sprung to her feet. Her eyes were wild and staring, and her beautiful curved lips were parted, show-

ing her little white teeth which ground together.

She turned on me furiously, all the passion and jealousy of the past miserable days finding an outlet in angry upbraiding : she accused me of being treacherous, of striving to win her husband's love, of I know not what.

I shudder when I think that then at last I lost my self-control. Yet I had an excuse. Besides the horrible injustice of her words—ten times more horrible coming as they did from one I loved so deeply—I had had weeks of terrible worry—of doubt as to what was best for me to do ; my brain was overtaxed, and I was, I know now, on the point of breaking down. The anger, the disgust, with which Riga's action had filled me, was the last strain possible, and, heaven help me ! for the only time in my life I lost my temper with Adèle.

For the moment she was silent under the bitterness of my words—words I would give my life to recall now. I reminded her of my unceasing affection—how I had borne so long with her reproaches, how for her sake I had consented to stay on in that house which had become so utterly horrible to me, in the society of that man whose treachery had made me hate and loathe him. . . . For a moment she was silent : then, with a cry, she snatched

from her hair a little silver dagger which she wore. I saw that—maddened as she was—she was about to plunge it into her heart, and I seized her arm. What happened then I know not, though I would give worlds to know. For still (foolish, mad as I know it to be) sometimes there comes a wild doubt if all *he* said were true. . . . Yet, how can it help being true! Bad, wicked as that man is, to lie on such a subject would be beyond him—a devil would not do it. . . .

I remember no more. There was a short struggle, and I lost consciousness. Something in my brain seemed to give way; the long strain had been too much for me. When I recovered, after I know not how long, blood was on my hands. I struggled to rouse myself and turn to Adèle. Then all the arteries in my body seemed to cease to throb suddenly. I turned cold and sick. She was there, wounded, dying, by my side. The *little silver dagger was in my fingers*, and Riga was gone.

I flung open the door and darted out, screaming wildly for help. No one came. The fog was impenetrable, and I could not even see so far as the horse's head. I seized one of the lamps from the carriage and fled back to Adèle's side. I tried in vain to staunch the life-blood that flowed faster and faster from

her breast. After a moment she opened her eyes, and then I first was certain of what I had done. You heard her words : ' Murderess ! ' She called me her murderess ! . . .

I have a recollection—a recollection I had not thought so clear until that scene on the sands yesterday—of seeing a man stand opposite to me at the other door of the carriage, and of wondering vaguely what he wanted. Then, Riga at last appeared. I saw him seize the stranger's arms and hurl him away. He sprang to the box and flogged the horse, which started wildly off. Half instinctively I clung to the step of the brougham, and dragged myself inside. Then I must have fainted.

When I next knew anything. . . .

Oh, I am wondering if you will believe my story, or if you will think me false ! It is all so strange, so mysterious, so horrible : yet, why should I attempt to deceive you—remember *that—why should I ?*

When I next awoke to clear consciousness, I found myself in a strange room, in bed. The shape of the curtains, the furniture, the general appearance of the apartment was French ; the sun shining brightly on the gilded mirrors on the walls recalled France to me ; a woman in a nurse's costume entering the room and seeing me awake, gave a quick exclamation, and

addressed me in French. My last memories had been those of the London fog—those bitter words telling me I was a murderess—that blood-stained dagger in my hand. I started up violently and cried out to the nurse, asking where I was—what had happened.

. Ah, some day I hope to repay that woman for her goodness to me at that dreadful time.

Very gently, very softly, she told me all. She had been called in to nurse me on that dreadful night. I had been raving in delirium, and for many days my life was in danger. Even when the fever had left me, and my body had recovered to a great extent from its effects, I still remained unconscious of external events and incapable of hearing or of answering questions put to me. It appeared that it was of vital importance that I should reach France as soon as possible, however ; and the doctor, whom my brother-in law had sent for, having given his permission, after a time, for me to undertake the journey, I was brought to Paris. At that time, she informed me, I was in a medical home. Fortunately, she herself was a Frenchwoman by birth ; and she had been permitted to stay and attend to me, in place of one of the nurses of the establishment.

Trouble, anxiety of mind, torture, cannot kill, or I should have died at that time. I got

better. My body grew strong again, my brain clear ; I felt life within me, healthy and vigorous. And what was in my mind meanwhile ? A horrible doubt which was almost a certainty ; a memory, perhaps the most terrible that could come to a human brain. . . .

This doubt became no longer a doubt at last ; and yet I did not die. One day Riga came to me. He affected to be kind—he *was* kind, indeed. Yet, if he had stabbed me, there on the spot, he would have been far kinder. When he had left me I knew it all. I had killed Adèle. There was no doubt : how could there be a doubt : how *can* there be ? And yet. . . . Ah, surely, if I am guilty, I am the least guilty of all who have ever taken life ! I swear I did not know what I was doing. I swear I did not know what I had done until—until I saw that dagger in my hands, and heard *her* speak those words. I was angry with her, I was overtaxed, and then I lost consciousness : I swear I lost consciousness of what I did. And yet (God help me, how well I see it) how many wretched creatures sent to a shameful death might not say the same, might not make the same excuse !

He told me : I had struggled for the knife—I had wrested it from her—a sudden wild light had come into my eyes—I had stabbed

her. Then, as if my temporary madness had suddenly passed, I had darted from the carriage and screamed for help, and returning had attempted to staunch the wound which I had made.

We had driven rapidly home, the fog fortunately clearing after a little while. All help for my darling had arrived too late. She died that night. Riga had been struck, even in his grief, with pity for me. He knew how I had loved her who was dead ; he had seen under what circumstances I had committed that fearful act, he had seen my instant terror and repentance, and he had acquitted me of all real cognisance of my crime. He determined to save me from its consequences.

The circumstances of Adèle's death were hushed up, how I know not ; and as soon as I was well enough, he and the nurse brought me to Paris. My wild cries, my ravings, my self-accusings had been put down solely to my delirium. The nurse was absolutely secret, and I was saved.

Saved ? Oh, the contempt, the loathing I felt (and still feel for myself) when I recognised that I was grateful to Riga for his mercy, grateful for being saved, grateful for being spared the punishment of my crime. How I trembled, how I tremble still, at the thought

of the horrors of the dock, the gloating of the public, the judge's frown, the cruel tortures of the advocate's questioning, the last dread scene of all!

Yet, surely I am punished enough without that shame! Never to know a happy moment, never to know peace, to feel cut off from every one, to have that constant, never-ending torture . . . I could not have borne it, I could not bear it, but that sometimes in my brighter moments—perhaps when the air is sweeter, when life beats more strongly in me, when friendly eyes meet mine, and kind faces smile on me—that one poor doubt, that one weak hope, comes back to me, and I think of Riga's falseness. He could be false and cruel to *her*—he has since been false and cruel to me, who knows? . . . but ah! those moments are only rare; and when they have fled the darkness is thicker than before.

When I had completely recovered, and it was necessary for me to leave the nursing establishment and make some preparations for my future, Riga came again.

I cannot write what happened at that interview. It is sufficient to say that, after all that had passed, with the memory of never-to-be-forgotten scenes before us, with the spirit of my darling standing ever between us,

he renewed—and this time openly—his attentions to me.

Horror-stricken, frightened, I put him off, I temporized, I hardly know how. An hour after he had left me, promising to return next day, I fled from Paris and from him.

Fortunately, I had a little money in my purse, and a small remnant of my share of our father's legacy was still in the lawyer's hands untouched. I fled to Florence, which I knew well. I was mistress of several languages, thanks to our wandering life, and I had a good education. I contrived to obtain a position as governess, for a few weeks, to a lady to whom I was recommended by my father's lawyers. After a time I left this place, and while I was again at the mercy of approaching poverty and misery, I met Mr. Walters and his grand-daughter Lucy.

The kindness of those two I shall never forget. I loved Lucy dearly, and we should have become even better friends had not a cruel accident happened to part us. This accident was the arrival of Riga, whom I thought I had escaped, whom I hoped never to see again.

You know, now that you have read this, the secret of this man's power over me. You will wonder no longer why I kept that assignation

with him, why he followed us on to the beach that morning, why he interrupted me when I was about to tell you my story. My miserable cowardice gave him his power ; I was afraid of the inevitable publicity and shame, afraid to face in open court the consequences of my crime.

What has changed me since yesterday ? What has made me resolve to defy this man, should ever we meet again ? What has made me resolve to suffer any shame, any punishment, rather than submit to his hateful presence ? I hardly know ; but I *am* resolved.

To-night, rather than that those who have loved me, and have been kind to me, should be drawn to share, in ever so small a measure, in my shame, I fly in secret from this place. You will never see me again : why should you care to ? Mr. Walters and Lucy I have said good-bye to for ever. Riga—I feel it, I know it—will follow me once more. When we meet it will be for the last time. . . .

Now that you know the woman to whom you would have spoken who knows what wild words, you will forget her, won't you—her and her miserable story. You will tear her from your mind, as you will tear this letter and scatter it on the sands, won't you ? You *must*. It is her wish."



CHAPTER XI

WHEN I had finished Madeleine Leicester's letter, doubt and hesitation left me ; a great weight seemed to have fallen from my heart. She was innocent ! I felt it — I could not doubt it. Innocent both of that terrible crime of which even I, for a moment, had suspected her, and guiltless also of this last mysterious robbery. Innocent ! I kissed the crumpled paper passionately, while I wondered how I could ever have doubted her. But I doubted no longer. She herself might tremble—she might yield to the insidious promptings of that scoundrel Riga, and believe that in a moment of frenzy she had indeed wounded the sister whom she loved so well ; never would I credit it !

She said that now I would understand this man's power over her—that I would know why she had kept that assignation which had seemed so horrible to me ! Yes, I understood ; I could comprehend all Riga's villainy, and

also I vowed to myself that I would punish it. This scoundrel should find henceforth that he had no longer a weak and defenceless girl to deal with, but a man able and willing to attack in turn. No longer should Madeleine Leicester go through the world bearing the burden of his crime !

“ His crime ? ” Yes, for I seemed to see the whole terrible story unfold itself before me. Tired of his young wife, faithless to her and in love with Madeleine, the scoundrel had himself perpetrated this vile deed, taking advantage of the quarrel and of her unconsciousness ; and, viler action still, he had then accused her. I could see now how simple it had all been for such a man as he—I felt assured now how certain it was that I was right.

And then my thoughts flew again to her letter, and I felt my heart beat faster. Why had she written to me ? And my pulse rose high. She knew that I loved her ; though we had been interrupted, I had said enough to show her that. And she was not offended ; nay, was not her letter in itself a confession that she did not want me to think the worst of her—that she wanted me not to judge her by the bare facts which I knew of, and which must seem so terribly to accuse her. Then

was there any hope that I was not myself indifferent to her, I wondered ; was there any hope that some day she might—— But I dared go no further, for I saw the gulf which must stand between me and the happiness which I had almost allowed my mind to dwell upon.

Whatever the real facts, I could not but feel that Riga held a terrible hold over Madeleine. He had seen the quarrel between the two sisters, and according to his account he had been present when Madeleine had stabbed his wife. This he would swear to ; and to corroborate his story Madeleine herself almost believed in her own guilt. What a terrible position was she in ! And now she had fled ; driven by this scoundrel she had flown from her friends, and from me who loved her and would help her, and I knew not where to seek her.

The hopelessness of the position for a time almost overwhelmed me, but the thought of her danger and necessity roused me to myself again, and I vowed that I would save her in spite of this scoundrel Riga—even in spite of herself.

* * * * *


The next few days I spent in attempting to discover some trace which should inform me

of either Riga's or Madeleine's whereabouts. For some time, however, I met with little success.

I discovered without much difficulty that they had left Viareggio separately—a fact I had never in my own mind doubted. Riga had taken the train for Florence early on the morning following the robbery. Madeleine had also left for Florence, but by another train, and later in the day. After this for some time I found myself at fault.

Chance at last put me on the track of Riga. I felt that he would not lose sight of Madeleine, and I determined for the present to confine my attentions to following him.

This, to my surprise, in the initial stages of the task, at least, did not prove difficult. Riga apparently made no attempt at concealment. From Florence to Milan, from Milan to Basle, from Basle to Paris, I never once lost the trail of the man I was following. At Paris, however, he rested for a time, and for some days I did not succeed in tracking him further than the northern terminus. Then, when I at last got scent of him again—nay, when I had even followed him to the very hotel where he was staying—he suddenly vanished; and this time, to my dismay, without leaving a sign behind him.



The blow was a heavy one. I had made so certain of him ; I had seemed so near him, and thus so near to finding Madeleine again, that my courage almost failed me once more. I spent a futile month in searching Paris—I made every effort which my invention and my love suggested to me, but in vain ; and retracing my footsteps, I attempted this time to pick up Madeleine's trace. But it was now too late. No tidings of her came to cheer me in spite of all my endeavours, and for a time I gave myself up to despair, spending an idle week in London, whither I had taken my steps, and where I shut myself up, refraining from visiting any of my old haunts or seeing any of my friends.

Fortunately for me, a power omnipotent where I was powerless was working for me in the dark, and Fate itself delivered me from my dilemma before it became unbearable.

CHAPTER XII

WHILE I was still hopeless, a prey to despondency, and uncertain what course to pursue, a letter reached me from Italy and awoke me to instant action.

It was from Lucy Walters, and was marked "urgent." The writer had evidently been in a state of great excitement, and the document was lengthy and rather incoherent, but I was speedily in possession of its chief facts, and these struck me to the heart with grief and foreboding.

Madeleine Leicester lay in danger of her life at Florence. She had been taken ill in some lodgings which she was occupying, and she was alone, and, so far as Lucy knew, entirely friendless.

It appeared that my good little friend and correspondent had learned this news from an Italian girl then acting as her maid, and who had a sister living in the same house with Madeleine. As soon as Lucy had been told

the girl's story her first thought was to fly to Florence and Madeleine's side. Before she could do this, however, it was necessary to obtain her grandfather's permission, and this Mr. Walters had refused. It appeared that the old gentleman was still kindly enough-disposed towards his grand-daughter's former companion, and was, if need were, prepared to assist her in a financial way ; but he considered that Madeleine's conduct required some amount of explanation before he could feel justified in permitting Lucy to associate further with her, and Lucy's application to join Madeleine in Florence was refused. Mr. Walters himself had written proffering Madeleine help in any other way, and Madeleine, ill and friendless as she was, had peremptorily refused it.

Yet, Lucy told me, she was ill, perhaps dying, and almost without money ; she had no friends to tend or help her, and she, Lucy, now wrote to me, as one who had known Madeleine, to hasten to Italy and attempt, either by force or stratagem, to aid her.

Poor little Lucy exhausted herself in apologies for troubling me, and in protestations of prospective gratitude, and I almost smiled as I thought how needless was her anxiety, as I cast my eyes over the tear-stained pages

of her letter. Madeleine ill, alone, and friendless! Ah, if I had been on my deathbed, Lucy, no power could have kept me from rising and going to her when I knew that!

My preparations were quickly made. I wrote a line to Lucy telling her to be of good cheer—that I was losing not a moment in obeying her request, and I hurried to take my tickets and set out on my journey. Madeleine, my darling! I was going to see her once more! Go to her help? Why the fastest train in the world would only creep till I was by her side, never to leave her again if I could have my way!

As I left London, my heart heavy, in spite of my hopes, with foreboding and dread, the city bells were ringing out merrily for a great event in history, and the sound of their chiming seemed to attempt to cheer me, and to whisper of sorrow past and happiness to come, with almost the golden joy of wedding bells. And as the flying engines carried me through smiling valleys, and over snowy mountains, even deep down under the mighty tops of the Alps, the rattle of the wheels and the throbbing of the pistons seemed to continue on their own account the kindly message, and bid me hope.

Were they right or wrong? Was their

message true or false ? Alas ! there was to come a time, and that ere long, when I was to remember their tale, and ask myself that question again in doubt and wonder.

* * * * *

There were no bells to welcome me to Florence when I reached that city early one morning ; nor, if the superstition concerning the fortunate omen of sunshine has any foundation, was there any presage of good-fortune in the drifting rain and cold mist which met my eyes as I drove through the streets.

I wasted no time, and a few steps from the house to which Lucy had directed me I stopped my coachman and descended from my cab. I did not drive direct to the door, for now that I had reached my journey's end and saw the house where Madeleine must be, the difficulties of the task that lay before me began to occur to me for the first time. During the journey I had thought little of aught but the joy I should experience in seeing her again, in gazing once more into those beautiful sad eyes, in hearing her low sweet voice murmur my name. Now, at last, I commenced to ask myself if all would be as easy as I had fondly imagined, and whether, indeed, I might not even fail entirely.

Madeleine had refused the help of Mr.

Walters, to whom she was bound by ties of gratitude, and who was of an age that made his favours easy for her to accept—was it probable that she would accept my advances without a struggle ?

As I approached the door of the house I sought—a lofty and dingy-looking building in a poor street off the market-place—two women emerged from the entrance and made their way down the street. I fancied they turned and looked keenly at me as I passed ; and one of them said a few words to the other, ending her speech with the word “ Inglese ” and a heartfelt, “ poverina ” which made me start and look after them. “ Poverina ? ” Was it of Madeleine she spoke ?

But I put aside my hesitation and quickly entered the house. A little way up the stairs I met an old man who was descending them. He was poorly clad and dejected looking, but his wrinkled face was kindly and pleasant in appearance, and I stopped him and asked him to direct me to the part of the building occupied by Madame Gennaro—the name given me by Lucy as that of Madeleine’s landlady.

The old man turned quickly and pointed down the street in the direction taken by the two women I had noticed.

"Alas, Signore!" he cried. "How unfortunate! You are just too late. A moment sooner and you must have met Madame Gennaro face to face. She has only just gone out. See, there she goes down the market-place with the Signore Giusti . . . but no, I am wrong: they have already disappeared; I fear it is too late."

I thanked him and turned back. I intended to stroll about for a little while, and await Madame Gennaro's return; but in a moment I heard the old man's weak voice calling after me, and I waited while he came hurrying along.

"A thousand pardons, Signore," he said breathlessly; "but I think you are English?"

"Yes, I am English," I replied, surprised, and wondering a little what he could have to say to me.

He nodded his head, and then stood looking at me for a moment, evidently in doubt. At last he appeared to make up his mind.

"As you are evidently—pardon me—a friend of the young Signorina, the poor little English lady who occupies Madame Gennaro's rooms, may I ask if you were about to visit her, Signore?" he asked eagerly.

I started. "Yes," I returned. "That was certainly my object, but—I——"

“And you were thinking of following Madame Gennaro, or perhaps waiting for her, here in the market-place? Well, Signore, if you are a relation of the young Signorina, may I say ‘Do not wait’? Madame Gennaro may be a long while gone, and the poor Signorina——” he hesitated. “But I see you wonder,” he continued. “You do not understand. Come, I will show you the way, and you will know why I have taken this liberty.” And taking my sleeve in his trembling fingers, the old man drew me towards the house.

I followed, surprised. We made our way up the dark stone stairs, for an interminable distance, as it seemed to me, the old man drawing me on eagerly, in spite of his failing breath.

“It is good that you have come, Signore,” he murmured. “Ah, the poor Signorina Inglese! so young, so beautiful. It is sad!”

“What do you mean?” I asked quickly. “Is she so very ill? Is she worse?”

We had reached the top story of the building, and the old man halted and motioned me to listen. “I heard her as I left my room,” he said softly. “This is my humble apartment, here on the other side

of the passage. Listen, Signore ; is it not heart-breaking ? And it is often thus ; it is often thus when she believes herself alone in the house. You see I move softly, and she doubtless thinks I am out. . . . Ah, how she sobs, poor innocent dove ! Listen, Signore, the walls are only plaster, and very thin."

He pointed to the door we faced, and I drew my breath sharply as the sounds reached my ears.

Heaven ! Was it Madeleine whose hopeless despairing sobs I listened to—she whom I remembered so proud, so calm, so self-contained ?

The old man, who had been watching my face eagerly, gave a little contented nod, and moved softly to the door.

" See, Signore," he whispered, " I will knock gently, and then open. My key fits both doors. There are two rooms within. The salon is the one on the right. It is there that the Signorina must be. Poor Signorina ! how pleased he will be to see her—her——"

" Her brother," I said quickly. " I thank you, and to-morrow—later on—I will——"

The old man stopped me with a little quick gesture. " Ah, Signore, it is for the Signorina's sake ! I have seen her. She is ill,

but so pure, so beautiful ! She is like my child who died ; and I have heard her weep so often. But I will knock, Signore."

The sobbing ceased suddenly as the old man tapped gently on the door ; and drawing a key from his pocket, he placed it in the lock and turned it.

As the door opened we heard a hasty movement in the apartment beyond, and after a moment a voice called out, " Is that you, Madame Gennaro ? "

My heart beat quickly as I heard those tones again ; still trembling with emotion as they were, I knew them well enough.

" Go in, signore," said the old man softly. " The Signore will excuse me if I wait for a moment, here on the doorstep, to see if all is well."

I drew a long breath. " Miss Leicester—Madeleine ! " I said. " May I come in ? It is I—Lawrence."

I heard a little gasp, and a soft cry (was it one of joy ?) and the inner door opened swiftly. Madeleine Leicester stood before me, her tall figure swaying slightly, her fingers clasping the frame of the doorway.

" You ! " she murmured, and trembling, gazed at me. And as I marked her pale

drawn features and tear-stained eyes, I strode forward, and, seizing her hand, pressed it to my lips.

“Madeleine!” I cried, and stopped, for she was trembling violently still. She made an effort to speak; she attempted to compel her limbs to support her; but it was useless, and with a little cry she sank to the ground. She had fainted.

While I supported her as best I could, I heard the old man who had been my guide call loudly down the stairs, “Madame Gennaro! Lucia! Are you there?” and a woman’s voice, harsh and unsympathetic, respond. I heard a swift argument between the woman and the old man, who spoke of me as Madeleine’s brother, who begged her to be kind, to be merciful, and to come quickly to Madeleine’s assistance.

To my relief—for how readily a man relies on even the worst of women at such a time—the old man’s appeals seemed to convince Madame Gennaro of the value of at least temporary politeness, and coming forward, she waved me aside, while with the assistance of a good-natured-looking servant who appeared from below stairs, she carried Madeleine to her room.

Seeing that for the present I could do

nothing further, I turned to the old man who was about to descend the stairs, and begged him to do me the favour of sharing a fiasco of wine at some neighbouring café. I was anxious to express in some way my gratitude for his service, and I also hoped to gather from him something of the state of affairs in the house we were leaving.

He accepted my invitation with courtesy, and we made our way together to a little café near by.

When we had seated ourselves, and I had thanked him for his timely assistance, I begged him to tell me what he knew of Madeleine's circumstances during the past few weeks. I did not again insist on my first hasty claim to a near relationship with her, and he did not revert to the subject. Whatever his opinions of my relations with Madeleine had been, he could not have helped seeing that at least we were on friendly terms with one another, and that my desire was to save her from trouble ; and I presume he was satisfied with that.

He told me his name was Antonelli. He was at present a subordinate clerk in a bank in the neighbourhood, but it was easy to tell from his manner that he had once held

a much better position ; and this, together with the way in which he spoke of Madeleine, attracted me to him greatly.

It appeared that he had been living in Madame Gennaro's house for some years, and that he knew her well for a hard, cruel, selfish woman. Madeleine had occupied the rooms opposite to his own, apparently since she had left Viareggio. While she had money Madame Gennaro had been attentive to her ; but when the poor girl had been taken ill, and her money had commenced to diminish, the woman had altered her tone completely, and her only desire had been to get rid of her lodger. Her ill-nature had but increased when she chanced to hear of Mr. Walters' proffered help and Madeleine's rejection of it. She had from that moment been harsh and brutal, and had taken every opportunity of insulting the young girl—treatment which, in her condition, weak and friendless as she was, must have affected her terribly, and perhaps, indeed, had brought on a relapse of her illness, from which she was about to recover.

I listened to Signor Antonelli's story with pity and indignation ; and as soon as I judged that Madeleine might have recovered somewhat from the shock my sudden

appearance had given her, I returned with the old man to the house.

I was not, however, permitted to see Miss Leicester again that day. Madame Gennaro, a very different woman now, herself opened the door to me, and informed me that the Signorina Inglese was not at all well, that she had sent for the doctor who had attended the case up to the present, and that until she had his permission she would on her own responsibility forbid the Signorina to see any one who might excite her further. She was very effusive, however, in her manner to me ; begged me to call as early in the morning as I cared, to hear the doctor's verdict, and assured me that Madeleine should have every attention.

I saw the woman's hard, eager eyes examining my appearance, mentally appraising my value, and I took a few notes from my pocket.

" Yes, do everything that the doctor recommends," I said quickly, pressing the money upon her. " Please spare no expense."

Her fingers closed on the money like talons. She thanked me obsequiously, but there was a half-veiled sneer in her tone which told me that at least Madame Gennaro was no

believer in my assumed relationship to Madeleine.

I trembled as I thought what might have been the helpless girl's lot at the mercy of such a woman's cruelty, and mentally blessed little Lucy Walters for being the cause of my presence there. Madeleine was safe now at all events, for she would, she must, accept my help for the future.

Alas! when I returned to the house near the market-place on the following morning, I found that the future was not so clear and smiling as I had fancied it to be, but rather darker and more gloomy than before.

The doctor who had been attending Madeleine reported a very serious relapse, and would not at present even answer for his patient's life.

CHAPTER XIII

THE weeks which followed, and during which Madeleine Leicester's life hung in the balance, were, I think, the most unhappy I have ever spent ; and I hardly know to this day how I passed through them. I believe I occupied most of the time in loitering outside Madame Gennaro's house, and waiting to see the doctor emerge after paying his daily calls.

Fortunately, however, the time did pass at length, and my hopes grew brighter again. From two or even three visits a day, the good physician descended to but one ; from one every day, at length, to three a week ; and from three a week to one last complimentary call. And then, after all my fears, after all the weary waiting, my time came at last, and I was to see her again.

It was evening when Madame Gennaro opened the door of the little flat to me, and told me that the Signorina was well enough

to see me. Ushering me in, she tapped at the door of the little sitting-room, and with a smile left me while, with a beating heart, I crossed the threshold.

There was no light of any kind in the room, save that of the moon which shone brightly in at the window from the heights of Bellosguarda, and fell upon Madeleine standing tall, pale and graceful, at the open lattice. She did not turn when I entered, and I approached her gently, admiring her beauty. Pale, delicate as she looked, I thought I had never seen her appear so lovely; and as she turned at last, and I saw in her eyes the traces of all that she had suffered of late, I sank on my knees and pressed her hand reverently to my lips.

She did not withdraw her fingers at once, but let her proud dark eyes rest on me for a moment with a look which set my heart beating madly. "Madeleine!" I cried, all the passion that I had restrained so long rising to my lips—"I know your story now; there is no secret between us from this moment. Forget that there ever was; forget that dark shadow which hung over your life, and think only of the future. Let that future be my care, and let my task, my object in life, be to make you happy at last. . . ."

She did not repulse me ; she smiled down on me gently, almost tenderly, but her eyes were sad still, and in their depths rested a pathetic shadow.

“ Can I forget ? ” she murmured softly. “ Shall I . . . be allowed to forget ? ”

I thought of the French Master, and my failure to trace his flight, and for a moment a dim foreboding caused my own heart to sink. Then my courage returned, and my love giving me security, I drew her to me. “ My darling,” I said tenderly. “ No one shall trouble you now, for I will guard you. Ah, Madeleine ! won’t you trust me to do so ? ”

My arms were round her, and my breath was ruffling the soft curls of her forehead. I could feel her slight lovely figure yielding, but with one hand to my breast she held me off, while her dark eyes met mine with a sort of terror in them.

“ Oh, Lawrence ! ” she said quickly, and her tones trembled. “ Don’t tempt me ! Ah, if you love me, go ! Ah, not for my sake ! ” she continued quickly, “ not for my sake—but for your own ! It would be weak of me : it would be wrong—it would be wicked ! I must not listen to you even—if——”

I drew her to me again, and my heart was beating madly. “ Even if—even if you love

me? Ah, is that it, Madeleine?" I cried wildly. "Oh, say that it is! Tell me that you care for me ever so little—that you could ever love me, and what can we have to fear in the future? What can the world hold for us but happiness!"

A faint sad smile curved the corners of her mouth. "Do you want me to care for you so much, Lawrence?" she said. "Is my love so much to you?"

"It is all my hope in life to win it, Madeleine," I cried. "I think it is all I have hoped for since that first night on the Molo at Viareggio."

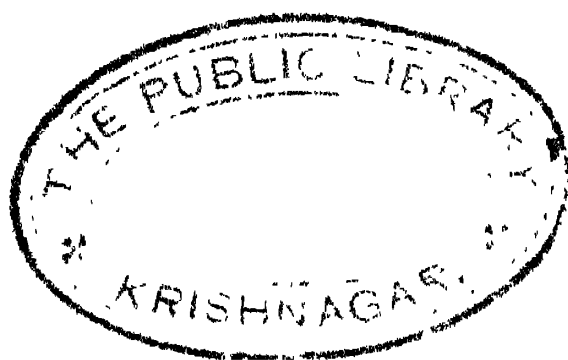
My eyes were turned up to hers pleadingly, and she bent towards me. "Poor Lawrence!" she murmured, laying her soft hand on my burning forehead, "What must I do—oh, what ought I to do?"

"Let your heart go, Madeleine!" I cried passionately, "follow its promptings, if indeed it turns to me. I love you—you must see it in my eyes—you must hear it in my voice. Listen to it, Madeleine; if you knew how deep it is, you would shrink no more from the uncertainties of the future—you would trust yourself to me."

Her eyes were fixed upon some point far out in the moonlight, and for a moment I

thought her unheeding ; and then she turned to me again. " Ah, Lawrence," she said softly. " This is an unequal struggle. You have conquered—the poor little battle is over ; ah, how could it be otherwise ! How can I fight you and my own heart too ! Oh, my darling—my own love, may you never regret it ! May you never curse me for my weakness ! Oh, kill me, Lawrence, before I ever see that you regret it ! "

I clasped her in my arms and pressed my lips to hers. " That day will never come, my darling," I said softly. " A bright future is before us now, and the dark past is left behind for ever. There shall be no more regret."



CHAPTER XIV

As the days of Madeleine's illness and slow recovery had been the most unhappy of my life, so the time which followed my last sweet evening with her in the moonlit room overlooking Florence was, I think, the happiest.

We were to be married almost at once as soon as certain formalities could be complied with ; for we had no relatives or friends who could raise objections or suggest delays ; and we passed the time in making bright plans for the future, and living only in the pleasure of each other's presence.

It was my constant endeavour never by word or sign to recall to Madeleine's memory anything of her dark and unhappy past, and she herself never reverted to it at all. Indeed there were times when I could have almost fancied that her two severe illnesses, coming, as they had, in such sharp sequence, had swept from her mind all memory of the

terrible tragedy with which she had been connected, and left her to face the future unperturbed.

Only once was there any reference made between us to the events which preceded her sudden departure from Viareggio, and that was when Madeleine informed me that Riga had left for America on his return from Paris, and had seemed to imply that he would come to Europe no more. Though no shadow of coming events hung over my mind, I confess I hardly ventured yet to hope that things should turn out so fortunately as this ; but at least it was something to know that thousands of miles of sea lay between us and the man who might even yet recall disastrously the part he had borne in Madeleine's life.

Meanwhile, as every day brought me new joys, revelations of fresh beauties in the character of her whom I was soon to call my wife, my love for Madeleine grew stronger and more passionate still, and I counted impatiently the hours which separated me from our wedding-day, which I looked forward to so eagerly.

Madeleine herself appeared to return my love almost as I could have wished her to. She was ever kind and sweet, ready to comply

with my suggestions, and—her unprotected situation forbidding that I should spend much time in her house—always apparently pleased to accompany me in the long rambles around the city in which we indulged, and in which I found her such a charming companion. Indeed, to all outward evidence she was as happy as myself in the turn events had taken, and looked forward to the future with as clear a mind; only every now and then I caught her eyes fixed on me with a little pathetic half-doubting look, which recalled the expression I had noticed in them at our first meetings. These moments, however, were only rare, and were past almost before I could ponder over them. When she noticed that I was regarding her wonderingly or with doubt, she would hasten to smile or make some remark which would distract my attention, and leave me undecided whether the expression I had noticed had been connected indeed with some thought in her mind, or had been merely a habit now grown natural to her.

And so the time passed on, and the day of our wedding drew near, without a cloud to dim its brightness.

We had decided to be married from Madame Gennaro's house, and then to spend our honey-

moon at the Bagni di Lucca near Lucca. The ceremony was to take place at the English church. Madame Gennaro, by this time all smiles and graciousness, willingly agreed to give Madeleine every assistance, and the kind old bank clerk, Signor Antonelli, was to be our only invited guest. It was doubtful if Lucy Walters would have been allowed to be present, and we refrained from causing her pain by asking her, though we kept her informed of our preparations, and had all sorts of good wishes from her.

On the morning of the wedding, a little hasty note from Madeleine—"Lawrence, Lawrence, am I doing right! It is not yet too late!" came to me by a special messenger and startling me, sent me flying to Madame Gennaro's some hours before the appointed time.

I found her in tears and suffering from great agitation. I attempted to comfort her and to obtain from her some idea of the cause of her trouble; but for a time it was useless.

"What am I doing, Lawrence!" she cried at last, clasping my fingers wildly. "I must be mad. It cannot—it must not be."

I caught her to me tenderly, and drew her hands from her white, tear-stained face.

“ My darling—Madeleine,” I cried, “ what is this ? What must not be ? ”

She looked up at me, her dark lovely eyes meeting mine for a moment with a terrified look.

“ My letter, Lawrence,” she said, shuddering violently, “ You remember my story ! Oh, I cannot speak of it—but—I am wrong to marry you ! I am wicked to bring my wretched life into your future. Ah, Lawrence, I love you so, that I have tried to forget—I *had* forgotten ! And now, this morning, when I thought of what this day would mean, when I remembered that terrible night, it suddenly seemed to come to me what I was doing. A voice seemed to say that it was not now too late, but that it soon would be ; that I had no right to be happy ; that I had no right to ruin your life or risk your future ; that I must give you up even if—even if it killed me ! ”

I clasped her closer to my breast. I covered her pale face with kisses, and smothered the sobs which broke from her lips. “ Madeleine ! my darling ! ” I cried. “ Ah, stop ! What are you saying ? ‘ Ruin my life,’ and by marrying me—by giving me all that my wildest hopes dare ask ! Ah ! how can you talk thus ! ”

“ Ah, but it is true, it is true ! ” she murmured.

I stopped her words. “ Listen, Madeleine,” I cried. “ Listen, my darling, and never let such thoughts trouble you again. Of that misery, of that tragic event which has darkened your young life, I believe you to be as innocent as that urchin yonder playing in the gutter. And remember, Madeleine, it is I, I only whose opinion in the future you have to question. No one else knows your sad story, no one else can blame, or even pity you, no one but that one bad man, and he is far away and never will return. If he should——”

I paused, for a shudder shook her frame, and her eyes looked wildly round her, while I felt even my own heart beat fast. I bent down to kiss her again, lest she should notice that I had been momentarily affected ; and looking up again quickly, I continued—

“ Why, Madeleine, even if he should return, have you anything to fear when you are mine ? Can I not protect and guard you ? ”

She sighed, and still trembled, but my confidence and my devotion had their effect at last ; and before very long I had succeeded in pacifying her to some extent. Nevertheless, I refused to leave the house again until she was ready to accompany me to the church ;

and I made my way across to the rooms of Signore Antonelli to spend the intervening time.

The old gentleman, who was himself dressed in his best, and apparently prepared to take his part at the wedding, looked up, nevertheless, surprised at my early appearance. I did not, of course, tell him of the reasons which had brought me there ; and when he made some jesting remark about my lover-like haste, I merely smiled and turned the conversation. For an hour or so I forced myself to converse indifferently upon a hundred indifferent topics, and contrived, I believe, to exhibit no more than a natural impatience, until the time came at last for us to leave the house.

A knock at the Signore's door, and a hasty word from Madame Gennaro, warned me that Madeleine awaited me ; and I hurried out to give her my arm down the stairs, and hand her, together with Madame (overpoweringly dressed, and, for her, quite amiable) into the hired carriage which stood at the door.

I had a quick glimpse of Madeleine's face as the carriage drove off and a little pressure from her fingers, which were icy cold, I noticed. Then the cab in which the

Signore Antonelli and I were to go appeared, and we followed in the direction of the church.

Would Madeleine get through the ceremony without a breakdown, I wondered, the deadly paleness of her features and the trembling of her lips making me doubt. I still seemed to feel the icy touch of her fingers through my glove, and I remembered the almost uncontrollable agitation which she had exhibited but a short time before. Would she have strength to do her part, or would her courage fail her at the last ?

What a strange wedding was this of ours surely ! I smiled as the thought passed through my brain, but the smile was half a bitter one. If the future happiness of wedded couples depends upon the usual accompaniments—the presents, the host of friends, the dresses, the carriages—surely ours was foredoomed. Yet, what did these things matter in reality, I asked myself ; what did anything matter when in an hour, in half an hour, I could call her mine for ever, could press her to my heart, could bear her away to some shady and secluded spot where there should only be she and I and our love ; where I could teach her to forget the past and, listening to the songs

of the nightingales of Lucca, live only in the present of our joy. . . .

I was aroused by a touch on my arm. It was Signore Antonelli, who called my attention to the stopping of the carriage. We were at the church.

I could not to this day give a description of our wedding ceremony. All my thoughts, all my anxiety, were concentrated upon the lovely figure standing tall and graceful, yet trembling, by my side. As if my great love had endowed me with divination, as if I had power to look into her heart, I felt, I *knew*, that Madeleine was on the point of breaking down, of refusing to continue the ceremony, even of flying from me. I knew that on her lips trembled who knows what rash and terrible avowal. Yet, that she loved me I had no doubt ; nay, that it was that love itself with which she fought, I felt assured ; and clasping her fingers as we stood side by side, I exerted all the power of my will to give her strength to continue, and force her to conquer her impulse.

Was I wrong ? Would it have been wiser had I yielded to her tears that morning : had I even pitied her unexpressed emotions at the altar, and led her from the church before the fateful words were said ? Ah,

with the arrogance, the confidence of youth and love, I never doubted my power to soothe her troubled conscience and calm her mind once she was mine ; and I persisted.

An hour later we were in the train, man and wife, on our way to Lucca.

CHAPTER XV

A WEEK at the Bagni di Lucca—a week of sunny days and moonlit nights, scented trees, flowers, nightingales—a week of happiness so complete as almost to make one fearful—and then, without a warning, the blow!

It was the first time we had been parted for even an hour—was it the love we bore each other which made us dread even a momentary separation, or could it have been some dim, yet unacknowledged, foreboding of the future deep down in both our hearts?

Business connected with monetary arrangements had obliged me to go into Florence a week after our arrival at Lucca. We had been for a long walk on the morning of my journey; the sun had been intensely powerful, and the afternoon had turned out close, sultry, and oppressive. Madeleine had a slight headache, and, fearful of her overtaxing her newly regained strength, I had persuaded her, against her inclinations and

my own too, to remain at the hotel while I completed my business, and returned as quickly as possible to her side.

My affairs arranged, I occupied the journey home on the next day in thinking of Madeleine, and the pleasure I should experience in being with her once more ; I imagined how her beautiful grey eyes would light up, and her pale cheek flush, when we met again ; and, deep in my dreams, I hardly noticed how the time passed, or took any heed of the incidents of the journey. Only, once, as the train flashed through a little station not far from Lucca, my eyes were caught by a figure standing on the platform—a figure which seemed strangely familiar to me, but which for the moment I could not place in my memory. It was not until some minutes afterwards that I sprang to my feet and flung down the window, staring out with startled eyes. Was I mad ? or had it been Riga I had caught sight of ?

We were travelling at a high speed, and the little wayside station was just disappearing from view, yet I fancied I could still see plainly the little knot of figures on the platform, and among them was none which recalled the French Master's.

When did the first doubt come to me? Was it then, as I sank back in my carriage, telling myself I was growing timid as a girl: or was it as I drove up to our hotel and saw no sign of Madeleine to welcome me? No sign of Madeleine, no tall graceful figure gliding from the shade of the verandah, or leaning over, pale and lovely, to fling me a kiss from the balcony, as I had so often seen her.

I hushed the beating of my heart, and hastened to our rooms. She must be lying down, I told myself, resting from the heat, or she had mistaken the hour of my arrival. She would be taken by surprise, and our meeting would be the sweeter—but my heart was beating thickly.

She was not in our apartments, and I hurried downstairs. I saw no sign of her in the public rooms of the hotel, or in the gardens. Trying to hide my agitation, to disguise the fear which was growing in my heart, I questioned the hall-porter, and the waiters. No one appeared to have seen her; and, mad with anxiety, I flew to our apartments again.

There was no sign of her in the little sittingroom which we had kept to ourselves, and where we had so often sat at dusk listening to the songs of the birds and talking of

our future ; there was no sign of her in her bedroom. . . but my eyes were caught suddenly by something on the dressing-table, and I gave a start, half of joy, half of apprehension. There was a little note in Madeleine's hand, and it was addressed to me.

I seized it, and with trembling fingers tore it open. A minute later I was pacing the room in hopeless agony and despair. Madeleine had left me !

Yes, she had left me—her note told me so ; and yet I could not realize it. Gone, while she still loved me more than the world—she said so, even while she wrote “farewell.”

With blinded eyes I read and re-read the words which it seemed to me must be my deathblow. Why—why had she gone !

“Lawrence, my darling, oh, my darling, forgive me ! Not that I leave you to-day : not that I tear your heart—for you will grieve, won't you—for a week, for a month, for a year—but that I ever was so weak, so guilty as to join my life to yours ! Ah, Lawrence, I loved you so, *love* you so, that I allowed you to persuade me even when my heart told me I was wrong—wicked ! Yet I trembled while I did it ; I was afraid ; and that fear never left me, even under

your kisses, even when I was happiest. Ah, Lawrence, the sword was only suspended by a hair above my head. I shut my eyes and closed my ears in vain. Heaven would not permit such happiness—and the sword has fallen. Lawrence, it fell to-day; and to-day, my darling, when I already awaited your return, when I so longed to see you again, I leave you, perhaps for ever—ah, Lawrence, I fear *for ever*!

“Lawrence, my love, I should never have tied my life to yours; I should have fought with my heart; I should have fled; I should have hidden myself from you! But I was weak. And now, now, when it is harder a thousand times, I must still work out my destiny; I must part from you, my darling.

“Listen, darling. That shadow which hung over me when first we met, which darkened my life, and caused me to leave the only friends I had, has not passed from my life, as vainly, foolishly I hoped it might. It has grown darker—for now it threatens *you*. . . .

“Lawrence, that man came yesterday. He came in hatred, with a wish for vengeance in his heart, and, ah, his wish is gratified. It matters not what he said. He threatened me—*me*, your wife! And,

oh, Lawrence, it is in his power to threaten. The loss of you, the terrible publicity, the dishonour to your name—all these hang on his word, if—if I am guilty. Ah, if I knew!—ah, heaven, if I only knew! But there might be worse than this, Lawrence; and it is this worse thing which he wishes—which he might compass, if my guilty weakness, the weakness caused by my love for you, were to tempt my heart any longer. But it shall not. *Your* wife, Lawrence, shall never descend to that. No! Better that we part—better that I undergo the worse—better that your name shall be shamed in me, than that I should allow that man to threaten me—to terrify me—to tempt me!

“But, thank heaven, your name may still be spared; the shadow may yet pass from *your* life at least!

“Lawrence, did I kill my sister, or am I the victim of a horrible snare? Did I shed blood, and such blood, in a moment of terrible madness, or is that man such a villain as never man was before? In a few days I shall know. Pray for me, darling, pray for me! You said you knew me innocent. Ah, if I dared to think you might be right!

“And now, remember, Lawrence, *never*

forget, whatever happens, I loved you more than my life. Do not attempt to follow me. It will be too late. Wait, Lawrence, wait. And should the worst come, darling, at least your name will not be smirked, your honour will be unstained. Good-bye, my darling. . . . I cannot trust myself to write more. . . . Good-bye. Remember

“Madeleine.”

What did it mean ? Where had she gone ! I trembled ; I fought against the knowledge ; but I knew ! .

Attempting, after a time, to recover my strength of mind, and reason clearly, I went to my desk and took out the time-table of the Florence-Milan route. Supposing my worst fears to be well-founded, was there any hope that I could follow Madeleine and stop her before she reached England ?—for that she would go to England I did not doubt.

The little printed book answered my question. There was no hope. The next train by which I could follow Madeleine would arrive twenty-four hours after her. In that time the worst might have happened. In any case there was nothing to be done till

morning ; and I must eat out my heart in impatience and despair.

With numbed brain and throbbing pulse, I flung myself on to a couch to pass the night, my cheek brushing a little silk jacket of Madeleine's—a pretty embroidered trifle which I had always admired, and which she had tossed carelessly over the back of the seat. The touch of the silk, the faint odour of her favourite scent, brought back a thousand memories of her ; and, pressing it to my lips, I waited for the morning.

* * * * *

Never shall I forget the 'awakening on that morning—I say "awakening," though I think I never slept. My head was throbbing fiercely ; my whole body seemed to ache, and a dull despair had taken possession of my heart.

In the dark watches of the night, sometimes wide awake with all my faculties about me, sometimes half-dazed and drowsy as with the effects of opium, always tortured and despairing, I had reviewed the terrible position to which affairs had come, and had only seen the clouds gather more darkly about us both. Rack my brains as I might, to one dread conclusion I could but come. If Madeleine had gone to England as I feared,

driven by Riga's threats, to put herself in the power of the law, she was lost—utterly irrevocably lost, and I could not help her.

“Help her!” I clenched my fingers till the nails tore the flesh, and groaned aloud. “Help her!” Why, it was I who must ruin her, it was I who must help to place the rope around her neck—I, her husband of a week—I, who would have given my life for her! Yes, for it was I, whose evidence *taken from my own lips at the Police-Station on that fatal night*, would confirm the story Madeleine had to tell, would substantiate the lie the which Riga must repeat.

Then, could I do nothing? Must I leave her to her fate? I remembered her terror of the courts, her fear of the publicity and the gaping crowd; and as I thought I believe I almost lost my senses.

And then, or I suppose I must otherwise have gone mad, I began to tell myself that there was still a hope. By leaving for England that morning I should only arrive a day after Madeleine—and might she not be delayed? Might she not even rest a little while on the road, or in London, before it was too late?

I hastened downstairs, after a hurried attempt to obliterate the traces of my night's

anxiety, and I eagerly questioned the servants of the hotel, careless what they might imagine, intent only on gaining information which might help me.

I learned little, and that little did not comfort me.

No one had called to see Madeleine on the previous day, but a tall dark man, answering to Riga's description, had been at the hotel, had lunched there, and had spent the afternoon in the gardens or in the public rooms. He had left in the evening, in time to catch the Milan express at Florence. No one at the hotel had seen Madeleine leave, but a few hasty inquiries outside assured me that a person of her appearance had also started for Florence that day.

I paid my bill, left orders for our things to follow to England—Madeleine had taken little with her—packed a small bag for myself and left the place.

As the lovely scenery of the Bagni di Lucca faded from my sight for ever I laughed bitterly. I had thought the week there the happiest I had ever spent. And now—what was this place to me now?

CHAPTER XVI

A VERY few inquiries at Florence and afterwards at Milan assured me that Madeleine was in front of me and travelling with all speed to England ; but whatever hopes I had of catching her before she could reach London were quickly crushed. An unprecedented fall of snow blocked our train on the Swiss frontier, and another day was lost.

My first act on reaching Dover was to purchase a newspaper, and from it I received a confirmation of my worst fears. Madeleine had given herself up to justice !

With a sinking heart I read the brief account of what was to the press evidently a windfall of exceptional value. The paragraph was given a startling headline, and ran thus :—

Yesterday morning a young lady of refined bearing and great beauty entered the Central Criminal Court, and informed one of the officials that she desired to

give herself up on a charge of murder. She was evidently labouring under great agitation, but her manner was collected, and her strange act bore every appearance of premeditation.

She was taken before Mr. Justice Barton for examination.

Apart from the difficulty of associating such a crime as murder with a person of her appearance, her confession was made more startling by the fact that the victim of the deed of which she accused herself was her own sister.

She gave her name after some hesitation as Madéleine Leicester; but upon being sworn she changed it to Madeleine Lennard. According to her confession the circumstances of the crime were as follows:—

On a date in November last she had accompanied her sister and her sister's husband—a foreigner, a Monsieur Riga—to the Haymarket Theatre. The night had been exceptionally foggy, and on leaving the theatre Mons. Riga's coachman contrived to lose his way. He descended from the box to make inquiries at one of the neighbouring houses. Mons. Riga also left the carriage and went to the horse's head. Meanwhile, the younger sister, the victim of the affair, appears to have irritated the elder by what she, the prisoner, describes as an unjust and baseless accusation. A quarrel ensued. The younger girl snatched a silver dagger from her hair, with the evident intention of stabbing herself. The elder one seized her arm and attempted to obtain possession of the weapon. During the struggle, as the prisoner asserts, she lost all consciousness of her acts. When she recovered her senses she saw her sister lying stabbed to the heart, and she found the dagger in her own hand. She screamed for help and ran from the carriage. No one arriving to her aid, she returned to the dying girl, whom she at-

tempted to assist. She was too late, apparently, to be of any service, but the victim still had strength to utter a few words. These words comprised a bitter accusation and reproach, and were, according to the prisoner, the first real intimation she had that it was she herself who had committed the crime.

That is the prisoner's confession, and is practically all that Mr. Justice Barton succeeded in eliciting from her. Her examination was made more difficult by certain reserves which she maintained, and which she refused to break through.

For instance, when asked where Mons. Riga was at the time of the struggle, and why he did not at once come to his wife's assistance, she replied that she did not know. When examined as to the nature of the accusation which her sister had made, and which caused the quarrel, she remained silent. When pressed to reply, she refused. She declares herself to have been taken ill immediately she recognized the consequences of her act, and she appears ignorant of anything which happened subsequent to the murder on that night.

Mr. Justice Barton naturally took up the position that in maintaining these reserves the prisoner was attempting to shield some one accessory to the crime, but this she strenuously denied. Her continual cry is, "I accuse *myself*—try me—prove me innocent or guilty!"

After some useless attempts to obtain further information, the prisoner was remanded for inquiries.

"The prisoner!" And the prisoner was Madeleine, my wife! My bride of a week whom I so loved, whom I would have shielded with my life from even the crumpled rose-leaves of existence, who was so proud,

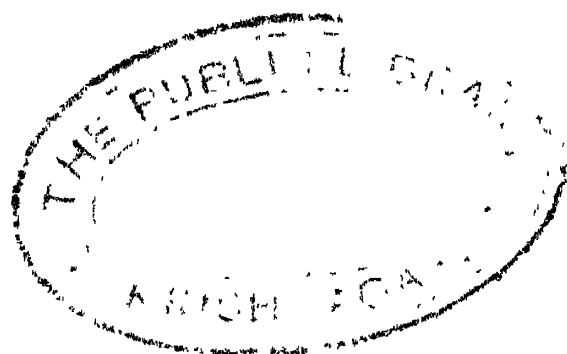
so delicate, so beautiful ! And she was in prison, and had accused herself of a horrible crime.

By the mercy of Providence, now that I was assured of the worst, my calmness began to come back to me, and I reasoned collectedly again. Publicly, by appearing in my own character as Madeleine's husband, I could do nothing for her. My own evidence would be brought up against me, and would discredit anything I might now say. I should be sought for, however ; there seemed little doubt of that, for Madeleine's strange reserve concerning some of the circumstances of the crime would necessitate the fullest inquiries and research. If I should be found and forced to repeat my story, my energies would be hampered, and my doings watched. And I was Madeleine's only chance.

Her only chance ! My poor darling ! Why ! she had thrown her life away ! Tormented by her conscience, almost doubting her own innocence, accused by that villain, she had thrown herself on the mercy of the law to prove her innocent or guilty,—and what could the law do ? With the wish to guard her sister's memory from the slightest slur, she had refused to say what was the cruel accusation which had caused her to lose her

self-control ; and she had refused to tell of the unfortunate girl's jealousy and Riga's treacherous behaviour. She had blinded the eyes of justice in the only direction which might mean safety. And yet I dared not openly appear to aid her. I prayed, as I had never prayed before, that in the inquiries which must follow, I should not be traced. It was our only hope. These inquiries must take time. There was comfort in that knowledge at least. But in that time I must perform a miracle. I must discover the real secret of the mystery.

Yet surely; I thought, as I imagined Madeleine in prison, hopeless, despairing, if ever man had a spur to make him perform great deeds, I was that man. If I had to drag Riga to the dock, side by side with Madeleine, and force the confession from his lips, it should be done, I swore ; but first I would try other means. The man was guilty—I knew it. Could I not prove it too ?



CHAPTER XVII.

I DECIDED not to return for the present to my old chambers, but to take new ones under another name, and to remain in the background as long as possible. During my absence abroad I had grown both a beard and moustache (formerly I had been clean-shaven), and I hoped to avoid recognition for a time.

There was one person, however, who must be aware of my identity and my return to England, and that person was the barrister I intended should defend Madeleine while I worked for her in secret, for defended she must be. After long and anxious consideration I had fixed in my own mind upon a very old friend of mine and my family, by name Woolmer.

Not only was Mr. Woolmer a keen and skilful lawyer, but he was also bound to my family by ties of gratitude—my father having

once, as I knew, rendered him a service of great importance, and which had, I believe, influenced for good his whole career. Though an older man than myself by many years, he had always been on most friendly terms with me, and I felt instinctively that I might rely upon him in such a crisis.

Keeping myself from observation as much as possible, and carefully refraining from anything which might attract attention, I took rooms in a quiet street off Covent Garden, and instantly begged Mr. Woolmer, under pledge of strictest confidence, to grant me an interview at his earliest convenience in my own rooms.

He arrived within half a dozen hours of receiving my letter. He was a tall handsome man, with a hard, very shrewd face, which I knew veiled a great deal of natural kindness.

I had of course written to him under my own name, but I had taken my apartments under an assumed one—that of Williams. To avoid any error I kept watch at my door for his arrival, and went down to meet him when I heard him arrive. I was just in time to prevent him from asking my landlady for Mr. Ensor ; but she found time, nevertheless, to address me as “ Mr. Williams ”

before I could get Woolmer upstairs ; and I saw his instantly repressed start.

He turned to me a little sternly as I closed my door after him, and looked at me steadily. " You want to see me as Mr. Williams ? " he asked quickly. " Very well. For your father's sake I hope there is nothing shameful under this assumption of an alias——"

" Nothing, I assure you," I interrupted quickly.

" I am glad of it," he replied calmly. " Tell me your story, and remember, to *me*, as long as you desire it, you are only Mr. Williams, a stranger never seen before."

I nodded my gratitude, and as clearly as was possible, I told him our terrible story.

In spite of his countenance, trained to impenetrability, I could see that I had affected him, and also that he took a very serious view of Madeleine's position. As regards her innocence or guilt he, of course, gave no opinion, nor was I able to obtain an idea of his thoughts from his expression or his words ; but I recited to him from memory as much of Madeleine's letter telling me her story as I judged necessary, and I could not think that it could avoid convincing him, as it had me, of her innocence.

He was silent, thinking deeply, for some

time after I had completed my case ; and then he asked me a few questions.

“ Thank you,” he said at last, as he appeared to have learned everything he desired. “ I will take leave of you now, *Mr. Williams*. I must return to my chambers and have time for consideration ; besides, I am very busy at present. You shall hear from me very soon.”

I suppose he saw a little look of disappointment in my eyes as I opened the door for him, for he smiled kindly and gave me a quick pressure of his hand. “ Don’t worry more than necessary,” he said quickly. “ You have done well to come to me ; and I don’t think you have made any other mistakes yet. Remain ‘ *Mr. Williams* ’ and don’t go about much openly. And for your wife, my poor boy—well, keep a brave heart, and a cool one. All that can be done shall.”

When I shut the door behind him, and returned to my rooms I felt a sensation of gratitude and relief. His words had cheered me, for I knew he was a man who did not waste speech in private life. To have such a man behind me meant that Madeleine would be defended with all the power the law could afford.

* * * * *

On the next evening I received a note from Mr. Woolmer, saying that he had finally decided to appear as Madeleine's counsel, and that he would let me hear from him more fully before very long.

Three days after the post brought me another letter, which ran as follows :—

“ DEAR MR. WILLIAMS,—

“ In connexion with the case known already as the ‘ Belfort Road Murder,’ I was in court this morning when Madeleine Lennard was examined under the light of certain inquiries which have been made. Poor girl, she is very beautiful. She still persisted in confining herself to the facts of her confession and no amount of baiting could make her compromise any one else, or admit anything of further importance. When asked whether she had been fond of her sister she broke down momentarily. She said this was the first quarrel they had ever had. I certainly should not have judged her to be of a hasty or passionate temper.

“ As she seemed to have no means at present, and no relations have appeared who are prepared to own her, and as she was, of course, unrepresented by counsel, Justice Barton decided to ask some one to

undertake her defence. I saw him looking round for some briefless one, and I hastily caught his eye. He started in surprise, and then turned with a little smile to the prisoner, complimenting her on her fortune in obtaining a full-fledged K.C. I could see my acceptance of the task puzzled the Court. As soon as Miss Lennard understood what was intended she refused to be represented. 'Why should I be defended?' she cried, 'when I have given myself up! For pity's sake, try me quickly—find me guilty or innocent—let the truth be discovered, and send me away from this dreadful place!'

"When it was explained to her that there were necessary formalities to be complied with, she gave a reluctant consent to make use of my services.

"In connexion with the inquiries, these have as yet been hardly more satisfactory in their results than the prisoner's examination; but her story has been to a certain extent confirmed in an unexpected manner: a strange tale reaching the Court from one of the North London police-stations.

"On the date given to the crime, by the prisoner, a gentleman applied to the inspector in charge of this station for advice. It appeared that he had been supping at a

restaurant in Piccadilly and, leaving early, had started to walk in the direction of Hampstead. In the intense fog he had lost his way, as Monsieur Riga's coachman had done, and, by a peculiar coincidence, about the same spot. Hearing a woman scream at a short distance from him, he hastened towards the sound and stumbled over the wheel of a carriage, in which he was horrified to see a woman lying stabbed.

"His version of what happened subsequently bears out the prisoner's account. He witnessed her return to the carriage, and her attempts to aid the dying girl, and he heard the accusation which comprised the latter's last words.

"While he still stood confused he was seized from behind and flung violently away from the carriage. He heard a man spring to the box and flog the horse, and before he could recover himself the carriage had driven off. He pursued it for a time, but pursuit was useless, and he quickly lost all trace of it in the fog.

"Fortunately, at the moment he desisted he encountered a friend who had been with him at supper, and they made their way to the nearest police-station, where they gave information of what had occurred.

Inquiries show that the gentleman who was so strangely connected with this crime is a young barrister, named Ensor, who is at present travelling abroad, address unknown. His companion, who of course has no other knowledge of the affair, treated his friend's story at the time as a jest, or rather as the result of the supper, which appears to have been a rather lively affair. He is quite ignorant of his friend's whereabouts. Mr. Ensor has been advertised for.

“In spite of Miss Lennard's confession, in spite of all the facts which appear to make it genuine, I do not believe her to be guilty. It is this confidence which made me finally decide to undertake her defence. Nevertheless, her position is a very dangerous one. The evidence of Mr. Ensor confirms terribly her self-accusation. Should the body of her sister be discovered, or this Monsieur Riga appear in court, then . . .

“However, there is one thing which might make my task of defending Miss Lennard an easy one should my theory as to the affair be correct. There were five people who were apparently connected with that tragedy in the fog. Madame Riga is presumably dead ; Mr. Ensor's evidence, so far as it goes, is hostile ; Miss Lennard accuses

herself ; Mr. Riga's testimony would, I fancy, be also hostile to the prisoner. Who remains ? The coachman who drove the brougham to the theatre that night, and who went to make inquiries concerning his road when the carriage stopped ! What was that man doing while the tragedy was being enacted ; and what became of him after the carriage drove away ?

“ If I could lay my hand on that man, with all the weight of my life's experience behind me, I should say Madeleine Lennard is saved.”

* * * * *

The coachman ? I remembered Madeleine in her letter saying that the man was a compatriot of Riga, and devoted to him. Did that account for his disappearance ; and had he seen anything of the tragedy ? Heaven ! There was at least a hope, and, reading through the concluding paragraph of the lawyer's letter again, I felt my heart beat high. I was young, independent, and I had such an incentive as hardly ever man had before to spur me on : it would be strange if I could not help Woolmer to his ends—the more so that I was already a step on the way. But I must explain !

It may easily be supposed that I had not

been idle during the few days of my enforced seclusion in London. My first thought had been of Madeleine, and how to communicate with her. It almost sent me mad to think of her alone and friendless in a prison cell, with her torturing doubts, and the terrible uncertainty which overhung her. I wanted her to know that I was near her, that I was watching her, that I loved her with all my heart and soul. I wished her to hear my assurance of her innocence, and to convince her of it in spite of herself.

I could not visit her in person. That would have been fatal to my plans, and to the complete freedom of action necessary to me. And I dared not ask Mr. Woolmer to speak for me. In recognizing me merely as "Mr. Williams," and in undertaking her defence he had, it seemed to me, done as much as I could ask, and more. But I contrived with difficulty to get a note conveyed to Madeleine which should have cheered her and comforted her a little, and I had to be content with the knowledge that she was aware of my presence and fidelity.

In addition to that, an incident had occurred to me which I hoped would lead to great events.

It had seemed to me, at the time I was

engaged in following Riga's traces after his and Madeleine's flight from Viareggio, that an important auxiliary was provided for me in the shape of the stolen Gusi, the vase which Mr. Walters had valued so highly; but, in spite of all my efforts at that stage of events, I had been unable to hear any news of the object.

I had, however, during the course of my investigations renewed acquaintance with a friend of my youth and impecunious days a well-known curio dealer named Higgs. This man was something of a character. He was very illiterate: indeed, he could, I believe, scarcely sign his name; but no connoisseur in Europe had a quicker eye for an "occasion." He was also, by the way, a man who would lend an undergraduate a ten-pound note or purchase a Great Auk's egg with equal sangfroid.

I was aware that Higgs would be a most likely person to assist me to trace the stolen Gusi, and so possibly to discover Riga; but at the time, as I have mentioned, he failed to be of any service. I had, indeed, almost allowed the fact of my application to him to pass from my memory. It appeared, however, that his recollection was better than my own.

I was walking quickly home to my rooms in Covent Garden one evening (I seldom ventured out before dark), when some one tapped me on the shoulder.

I had been passing the "private bar" entrance of a public-house, whence several loudly-dressed men were issuing. It was one of these, but the least loud of the party, who had chosen that uncomfortable means of attracting my attention.

Greatly startled—for I had not anticipated being recognized, and I did not know what disaster it might portend—I swung round to face the man, and to my relief saw that it was Mr. Higgs. He grinned good-humouredly at my startled face, and was about, I could guess, to make some jest recalling youthful indiscretions.

When he saw how upset I had really been, however, he changed his idea and, taking my coat sleeve in his stubby fingers, led me aside from his companions who awaited him.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Ensor?" he said confidentially, looking up at me with his red wrinkled face a little on one side. "Hope I didn't startle you. I knew you at once though—excuse me—I see you've grown hair on your face. It's a funny thing, I was thinking of you only this morning."

"Were you?" I asked:

"Yes. You remember that Gusi you were asking after some time ago—or was it the man who had it? I forget. Anyway I know where that Gusi is now.

"You do?" I gasped. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Sure? Of course I am."

"But it mayn't be the same," I said dubiously.

Higgs laughed silently. "Not the same? Do you know how many Gusis there are like that in the world? Hundreds. Do you know how many there are in Europe? Three. In private collections? One. This is the one. The niggers don't part with them, you know."

"Where is it?" I asked quickly.

Higgs smiled again. "I am always pleased to oblige you, Mr. Ensor," he said. "It is in my shop."

"In your shop?"

"In my shop. It was brought there this morning."

"Who by? For heaven's sake tell me who by," I cried.

Higgs looked at me curiously. "Well, I don't know why I shouldn't tell you, Mr. Ensor," he said at last. "It was brought by a foreign gentleman—a tall dark chap——"

"Riga!" I ejaculated.

"No. His name wasn't Riga, it was Tedesco. However, it may be the man you're interested in, all the same. He was recommended to me from a dealer in Boston, U.S.A., and with a reference to this Gusi. You see, this little Gusi is rather a valuable thing, and it isn't every one who will buy it. A thing like that ought to have a history; and perhaps the history in this case isn't forthcoming. Perhaps there's something queer about it—something queer about this Tedesco chap, eh?"

I hesitated.

"I certainly wouldn't buy this Gusi," I said, after a moment's thought. "That is my advice. In return will you do me a great favour?"

Higgs nodded. "Always ready to do you a turn, Mr. Ensor. You always treated me fair." He was referring, I think, to certain financial transactions of my youth.

"Let me get a sight of this man," I said quickly. "Stay, have you his address?"

"No. He was to call back about the Gusi. He just left it in my hands. Innocent, wasn't it?"

"When is he coming?" I asked.

"In the evening at 7. You come along

at 6.30. I'll arrange you get a squint at him, Mr. Ensor, and then it's your own look-out. I can't very well help you afterwards."

"There is no need to trouble about that," I said. "I am much obliged. I will be with you at 6.30. By the way, my name ins't Ensor; at present it is 'Williams.'"

Higgs looked up quickly, and then smiled. "And his isn't Riga; it is Tedesco. Funny, isn't it?" he said, and with a nod he joined his companions, while I walked home in thought.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON the morrow, punctually at the time mentioned by Higgs, I made my way to the appointment.

The outside of the curio-dealer's shop hardly concorded with the real status in his profession of its proprietor. It was a dingy-looking place, in a still more dingy road off Oxford Street, and its dusty windows, ill-painted front, and absence of distinguishing marks gave it a retiring aspect.

Incidents connected with my 'varsity days had endowed me with a knowledge of the land, and I made my way to an obscure side door to enquire for Higgs.

A Jewish boy of dirty appearance replied to my knock, and showed me into an inner room, where Higgs himself sat smoking and turning over his treasures. To one not so deeply distracted as myself the apartment would have been interesting. The fat common-looking man was seated at a table

covered with rare and curious objects. In one stumpy hand he held a short black cigar, while with the other he fingered a costly medallion. Around him upon the walls, on the floor, on the window-ledge—in the fireplace even—rested pictures, vases, armour, and jewels of every variety. In the centre of the table, immediately in front of him, I noticed a queerly shaped, queerly coloured jar.

Higgs looked up as I entered the room, and gave me a nod. "You are in good time, Mr. Ensor," he said. "Take a seat. 'See any one about when you came in?'"

"No," I replied; "that is, I saw no one of importance."

Higgs nodded. "That's right," he said. "Now, let's think. You see that queer-looking vase there on the table?"—he pointed to the jar—"that's the Gusi—the Ashantee jar, you know—which this foreign chap you seem anxious about asks me to buy. Now you want to see him, as I understand; and you want to know where he lives, which I'm sure I can't tell you. But I think I can manage without much trouble to put you in the way of what you want——"

"If you can, I won't forget it, Higgs," I said eagerly.

"Well, that's all right. Now look here : just step across the room," said Higgs ; and he led me to the side opposite the window. "See that wall ? Well, that's the room where I generally talk business ,with customers. There's a door there, though you wouldn't think it. And there's a crack in that door, though how it came there don't matter ; it's a useful crack anyway ! Just put your eye here, Mr. Ensor."

I obeyed his request, and, looking through the chink to which he pointed, I found that I could see into the next room, an apartment which I remembered well as the scene of former monetary transactions.

Higgs peered over my shoulder, breathing heavily into my ear. "That's all right, ain't it ?" he asked complacently. "Now, you stay here ! When this foreign chap comes he'll go in that room. You have a good look at him while I'm talking to him. There's the door, you know, at the back of you, into the street. I shan't keep him long. I've settled not to deal over that vase. I'm taking your advice, you see. When he clears, you follow him. See ? Then I've done with the whole business. Does that suit you ?"

"Perfectly," I replied. "If I lose him when he leaves here it will be my own affair."

At that instant there came a knock at the door, and the Jewish boy popped his head in. "Gentleman to see you, Mr. Higgs," he said.

Higgs walked softly to the hidden door, and peered through the crack which we had just left. Then he turned to me. "It's him," he said. "Now, don't forget what I told you. Anything else?"

"Nothing, thanks," I returned, and with a beating heart I, too, walked towards the wall.

"Good-bye," said Higgs softly; and I waved my hand in reply. I could not speak, for my eyes were fixed to the chink in the hidden door, and as I looked through I found myself within a couple of yards of the French master.

He was standing sideways to me, and facing a door to the right of my position. He was much more poorly dressed than I had seen him at Viareggio, and looked, I thought, pale and haggard. His face wore an intent expression; his eyes were fixed on the door, and his hands opened and closed ceaselessly.

At the sound of Higgs' footsteps in the passage outside he gave an exclamation, with a quick turn of his eyes upwards; but as the dealer entered the room he appeared to pull himself together with an effort. He smiled

at Higgs, who contented himself with a curt nod, and took a chair at a desk by the window. For a moment there was silence ; and then Riga looked up, apparently a little surprised.

“ Am I early, Mr. Higgs ? ” he asked quietly.

Higgs was turning over some papers on the desk, and he did not look up. “ I don’t know,” he replied shortly. “ But if you are it doesn’t matter much ; or rather, perhaps it’s all the better. You’ve come about that Gusi you were trying to sell me, I suppose ? ”

“ That Gusi you were going to buy—yes,” said Riga, with a quick glance at Higgs, and a sudden drawing in of his breath.

Higgs shrugged his shoulders carelessly. “ Then you’ve wasted your time, Mr.—— Let me see, what did you *say* your name was ? ”

Riga turned pale at the tone, and started, but recovered himself rapidly. “ My name doesn’t matter,” he said quickly. “ I don’t understand your remark, ‘ I have wasted my time ? ’ What do you mean ? I am here at your appointment. You arranged— You were to purchase——”

Higgs interrupted him brusquely.

“ I arranged nothing. I was to purchase nothing. I made an appointment, it is true,

for the purpose of telling you of my decision. Well, it is this—I don't buy."

Riga started forward violently, with his eyes flashing, but he stopped himself as violently, and spoke with an effort at calmness, though I could see the beads of perspiration standing on his forehead. "You don't buy, Mr. Higgs? Have you considered? Is this your—your final decision?"

Higgs nodded. "It is," he said.

Riga's hand went to his lips, which he had bitten savagely. He paused for a moment, and then moved a step nearer the dealer. "Mr. Higgs," he said gently, "I beg you to reconsider. I am prepared, if that is what you wish, to concede to your own terms regarding the vase which, as you are aware, is a very valuable one. I am, as I told you at our last interview, pressed for money. I have been at great trouble and expense already; I have made the journey to America, and I returned with the assurance that I should find a purchaser in you——"

Higgs interrupted him impatiently. "It is no good talking, Mr. What's-your-name," he said harshly. "That is my answer. I am a free agent. I buy what I like and I sell what I please. I don't buy on this occasion."

"At any price?"

“At no price.”

Riga drew back as if a snake had bitten him, and passed his trembling hand across his forehead. “Mr. Higgs,” he gasped, “for God’s sake, consider a moment! You don’t know—I—I—I must have money—I——”

Higgs shut his desk with a bang, and rose to his feet. “I don’t buy,” he repeated.

For a moment I thought that there would be a struggle, for the two men faced one another, Riga pale with fury. Then a knock came at the door, and the little Jewish boy announced another customer. Higgs gave some instructions, and then left the room. In another moment he joined me.

“Well,” he said coolly, glancing in my direction, “if you want to know where he lives you’ll have to look sharp. Here’s his blooming Gusi, and he’ll be off in a minute. All the same, do you know where I shouldn’t be surprised if that feller made for now?—the river! He’s run it a bit fine.” With a nod he took the little vase from the table, and, twisting a piece of paper round it as if it were a pound of tea, he left me.

As I looked through the crack in the door again I understood what he meant. Riga had flung himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

He looked up quickly as Higgs returned and placed the Gusi on the table, and I saw that he seemed ten years older. Without an effort to conceal his emotion he took the vase and staggered to his feet. As he reached the door he turned fiercely and raised his hand towards Higgs. "May eternal curses blast you, and this accursed thing as well!" he cried. Then he turned and staggered from the room. I waited a moment, and then, opening the door which Higgs had pointed out to me, I made my way into the street.

A quick glance showed me the figure of the French Master before me, and I followed cautiously. I need have taken no precautions, however, for after a moment's hesitation Riga walked swiftly on, without a glance around him.

When we had reached Oxford Street Riga turned northwards and made his way down various side streets past Portland Street station, and across Regent's Park. Had he turned round when we reached these quieter, more unfrequented neighbourhoods, he might have seen me, and I had determined in that event to accost him at any risk; but he held his head down and strode on, almost blindly, as it seemed to me; and we passed from the Park into the densely-populated

town once more without an incident, and through this again onwards in the direction of Hampstead Heath.

Beyond the Spaniards in a northerly direction lies a quiet road, bordered with hedges enclosing cultivated fields, and almost resembling a country lane. Along this Riga made his way until he came to a turning on the left. This he took, and vanished suddenly from my sight. I followed slowly and cautiously, but when I rounded the corner there was no one there.

I looked round me at first in amazement, and then my eye followed the course of the little lane. I saw that it was merely a cul-de-sac enclosed by thick hedges, and extending only about fifty yards before me. At the end stood a little cottage surrounded by a few black-looking trees. No other habitation was to be seen, nor any sign of human beings. It was to this cottage that Riga must have made his way, and for a moment I hesitated what to do.

Then, deciding rapidly, I made my way to the cottage, keeping as closely as possible to the hedge, in the hope of escaping observation.

As I neared the house I turned aside a little, avoiding the front windows, and, entering the

little neglected garden by a side gate, I passed round to the back of the building.

I had no plan in my mind ; indeed, I hardly knew what it was possible to hope might come from my idea of examining the cottage closer. It seemed almost certain that I must be seen sooner or later, however cautiously I moved, and I certainly had no thought of what I should say or do if I found an interview with this man Riga unavoidable. But, as so often happens when one commits oneself to a rash act, fortune favoured me. There came no signal of my approach having been noticed from the front windows of the cottage, and the rear of this silent habitation seemed as deserted as the rest.

The black dismal-looking trees grew close to the cottage at the back, and an overgrown ill-kept hedge of privet ran down one side and round underneath two of the windows on the ground floor. These windows were lighted, for it was already growing dark ; and, keeping close in the shadow of the privet, I crept towards them.

The sound of a harsh cough startled me for a moment, sounding quite near me, but after a second I saw that the top of one of the windows was open, and the further noise of voices convinced me that the room nearest to

me was occupied. I crept still closer, and looked in.

A thin blind of holland had been drawn down, and was evidently intended to cover the window, but a corner of it had caught in a high-backed chair, and I saw that the interior of the apartment was exposed to my gaze. It appeared to be a small room—half kitchen, half sitting-room. In front of the fire sat, or rather crouched, a middle-aged grey-haired man, apparently in one of the later stages of consumption, and giving vent every now and then to the racking cough which had startled me. At the side of the hearth, with her profile only turned to me, reclined a handsome hard-featured woman, in the indoor costume of a hospital nurse. Between them, on the hearthrug, lay a huge Russian wolf dog, asleep, a great tawny, wire-haired brute, whose ears twitched now and then in his slumbers, and who made me congratulate myself that I had chosen the hour of his siesta for my examination of the cottage.

Even as I looked the inner door of the room opened, and Riga entered. At the sound the dog sprang up and growled furiously, but the man shouted something to it, and it retreated, still growling, under the table, whence its huge head protruded surlily.

Riga's face was deadly pale, and his eyes looked haggard and bloodshot, I noticed, as I drew nearer still to the window. He spoke harshly, quickly, but I could understand nothing of what he said, and the consumptive man replied also in an unknown tongue.

My heart was sinking, and I began to fear that my spying would bring me small result, when the woman rose impatiently.

"Speak English—or French," she said quickly, in the latter tongue, to the consumptive man; and then with a glance of her dark eyes in the direction of Riga, "You know I cannot understand you and Ivan when you talk. You look ill, Monsieur Riga, ill! Something has happened!"

Riga, biting his fingers nervously, flung himself into a chair facing the window, and for a moment I met his bloodshot gaze, and forgot that in the darkness outside I was invisible to him.

He passed his hand through his short black hair, and I could see that his fingers were trembling violently. "Ill?" he said quickly, in French. "Ah, if you knew! Listen. I have failed. I can get no money. But money, money, I must have. A thousand curses! She will die! she will die! and I can get no money! That devil of a dealer

deceived me. He refused to buy ; he laughed at me ; he flouted me ! And he was my last hope ! Curse him ! May he——” He rose to his feet and paced the room, while the great dog growled persistently.

The man looked up from the fireplace with anxiety in his face, and was about to speak ; but his cough shook him again, and he was silent, letting his chin fall sadly on to his chest. The woman bit her lips, and glanced at Riga with a peculiar expression, and then at the consumptive man. “ Ah, so you can get no money ? ” she said coldly. “ No , money, Mr. Riga, and *she* will die, eh ? ”

Riga did not seem to notice her tone, which seemed to me one half of triumph ; and, flinging himself into a chair once more, he gnawed at his fingers. “ She will die, I tell you,” he cried savagely, “ and I cannot help her. Ah ! cursed fool that I was to drive her to it. My darling, my sweet dark angel ! And I could have saved her, even now ! What do I care for your English police, your judges, your prisons ? Money—money would have saved her ! I could have done it. And then—then perhaps she would have turned to me. Ah ! my love, you knew not what you did ! I terrified you, and you chose *this* rather than spare me one of those smiles, one

of those burning looks that you lavish on that cold Englishman, curse him! What would he do for you! And I—I could have——” He broke down, and buried his face in his hands, apparently careless of his companions.

The woman stood looking at him for a moment, while the consumptive man let his chin sink still lower and sighed deeply. Then she spoke in a swift, low, eager voice, while I listened with all my soul.

“There is no hope for her, then?” she said. “Nothing can save her now? She will be brought to the dock—they will say ‘guilty’—she will be hanged?”

Riga turned on her with glaring eyes and raised hand. “Ah, devil!” he cried, “are you glad? Do you fancy——?” He stopped hastily, and both he and the woman glanced at the bent figure seated by the hearth.

Riga made a despairing gesture. “Yes, she will die!” he said. “She has confessed. She has called herself a murderess. *She!* But no! She shall not die! They shall set her free if I have to tell all.”

The woman strode forward with a quick exclamation. “You wouldn’t do *that!*” she said sternly. “Are you a child, Riga, to let your mad infatuation carry you so far as that?”

This mad fancy which has already cost so much ! And even if you do not care for your own neck, what of us who helped you when your life was in danger, who put our necks into the noose for you ? Oh, I know their laws ! What of us ? ”

Her furious tones roused the man by the fire, and he rose to his feet. With a quick angry glance at the woman he passed her, pushing her roughly aside, and, throwing himself at Riga's feet, he took his hand and kissed it. “ Master,” he murmured hoarsely, “ Master, what can I do ? ”

Riga looked down gently at the weak grey head, and touched it with his fingers. Then he drew himself up suddenly. “ Oh no, I will not despair,” he said. “ There is time—there is time. There must be a way somewhere. You are right, Manon. To do *that* would be to throw her into *his* arms again. Good Ivan ! faithful Ivan ! There is nothing you can do, Ivan ; but perhaps *I* may yet do something.” As he finished speaking he turned and left the room quickly. The woman, after looking at the door for a moment, followed him.

She did not return, nor did Riga ; and the consumptive man resumed his seat and sat looking sadly into the fire.

I waited a few moments, uncertain what to do, and then I heard the woman call from upstairs. The man looked up. "Has the master gone?" he said.

"Yes. Are you coming up?"

The man rose slowly and took a candle from a shelf, calling the dog as he did so.

I understood, and not a moment too soon. Riga had left the house, and the couple were probably about to retire for the night. "But the dog?"

There was no time to lose, and quickly and noiselessly I made my way into the lane. There was of course no sound of Riga's footsteps in the darkness, and I saw that there was no more to be done that night.

I made my way homewards in deep thought. Where had Providence led my steps that night? Ah, Madeleine! and whither might not this little lane lead me in the end?

CHAPTER XIX

“WHITHER would that little lane—and my strange meeting with Riga and his friends—lead me?” That was my thought throughout the night which followed: the doubt which greeted me with the morning.

Whatever the answer, it was there—there in that cottage, that my prospect of helping Madeleine lay. I was sure of this, and I formed my plans in accordance with the conclusion. I must learn more of these people: this strange couple: this man who kissed Riga’s hand and called him “Master”: this woman who looked at him so queerly, and spoke of help which had endangered them. Who were they, and what was their connexion with the French Master? Could I doubt the answer! But I must be cautious, for what I knew depended on my efforts! Madeleine’s liberty, and perhaps her life.

As I thought of this, as I recalled her lovely

face, and lived again in imagination the sweet, short days at Lucca, when she was mine entirely, and no thought but our love intruded on our happiness, I felt the impulse come to dare all, to force this man Riga to the Courts, to confront him with Madeleine and say, "This is the Murderer! *She* is innocent, and here is the shedder of blood!"

But a calmer reason prevailed. The risk was too great, the result too doubtful. Riga, in spite of this mad love which he seemed to bear Madeleine, might still accuse her when brought face to face with death, and then what could save her? No, I must continue in the path I had laid out for myself; but ah, if I only had more time!

I heard from Mr. Woolmer that morning. He told me that the police had been busily engaged in making enquiries. What they had discovered he did not know, but Madeleine's next examination was to take place in five days; and I judged he thought it probable she would be committed for trial.

Mr. Woolmer also informed me that he had been the recipient of two letters which he had been requested to undertake to deliver to his client. These letters he forwarded unopened to myself, and I read them with eager interest. They were unsigned, but

there was no doubt from whom they came. It was Riga.

The first letter was brief. It said that the writer bitterly deplored Madeleine's rash act in giving herself up to justice, and begged her to do nothing further to incriminate herself ; it went on to tell her to have courage ; that means were being taken to ensure her escape from her present danger ; and it assured her of the ever-unchanged feelings of the writer.

The second letter was for some distance a repetition of the first, but without its hopefulness. " Unexpected difficulties had arisen, and help was delayed ; but only delayed. Madeleine need not fear. Succour would come ! But why—why had she taken this rash step ! Why had she allowed the passionate outburst of the writer's uncontrollable and thwarted love to terrify her and drive her to such a pass ? " • And then came a mad outpouring of reproaches, passion, wild adoration, which made me clench my teeth, even while half pitying the poor wretch from whom it was forced.

But the pity was short-lived, and quickly gave way to deadly anger when I realized to whom it was due that Madeleine stood where she did, who had darkened her life

with that never-passing dread, who had separated her from me and placed her face to face with terror—and all for what? for a base passion, hopeless from the first. No, I would have little pity when the hour should come! but when would it come?

About mid-day I made my way again in the direction of Hampstead. I had delayed until that time purposely, for it appeared to me almost certain that Riga lived at the little cottage whither I had found my way on the previous night, and I wanted to give him the opportunity of leaving it before I arrived. My business and my hopes were with the man and woman of the house, and most I hoped from the woman, in whose face I fancied I had read conflicting feelings towards Riga. She was a woman, and I knew the power of jealousy. Should that fail, surely money spent like water, as I would spend it, must do something!

In my first attack I failed, however. The dark handsome female of the night before opened the door in answer to my summons, but at my first word she stopped me. "You are mistaken," she said coldly, but firmly; "there is no one you can want to see in this house. There is no business here which you can possibly have anything to do with."

Her quick snapping up of my unfinished sentence, and her comprehensive declaration staggered me; and for a moment I stood staring blankly at her dark contemptuous eyes and thin compressed lips. "Your husband? Can I see him for a moment?" I said at length. "I assure you I will make it worth his while to answer——"

She stopped me again. "Can you speak Russian?" she said quietly.

"No."

She threw up her head with a little bitter laugh. "He can speak nothing else," she said.

It was a lie, and I knew it, but what was I to do?

"One moment more, I beg," I said, seeing that she was about to close the door upon me. She frowned. "Ah, these English gentlemen!" she said. "Must I tell you again? There is no one here you can possibly want to see. There is no business here which you can possibly have anything to do with."

I drew back before her firm tones; and the moment my foot was off the threshold the door slammed in my face. As I passed down the little path, her light contemptuous laugh followed me and brought the blood to my cheeks.

I had failed there, but there remained my second chance—the consumptive man. But how was I to see him? My glimpse of him on the night previous had made him seem as one in the last stages of a fell disease. Was it probable that he ever left the house? and if not, how could I have speech with him?

My chances seemed remote, I had to acknowledge; but the stakes were great, and with the memory of that woman's insulting manner and contemptuous laugh in my mind, I resolved in some way or another to succeed. However, I could not but tell myself that by my failure I had made my task more difficult. I had determined to watch this mysterious house until fortune favoured me, but it was before all things necessary to avoid Riga's suspicions. That woman would inform Riga of my visit, and although I had little fear that he would recognize me from her description, with my new beard and moustache, still it was possible that he would take means to discover if he were watched, and in that case my plans would be futile.

This conviction grew upon me to such an extent that, precious as time was to me, I determined to venture no more that day. The woman might, for all I knew, be even

then watching me. If I left at once, who knows, her suspicions might be allayed, and Riga not be warned? To-morrow I might meet with better fortune; and almost unwillingly I returned to my rooms to spend a miserable day.

CHAPTER XX

THE next morning found me early on my way to the cottage at Hampstead; indeed, it was hardly eight o'clock when I reached the corner of the little lane. My reason was that I wished to make sure if Riga left the house. Should he do so, I should take it as a sign that his suspicions were not aroused, and I could wait more confidently for chance to give me an opportunity of approaching the consumptive man, Ivan.

On turning into the lane I did not continue my way down it, but with the exercise of some little agility, I scrambled over the thick hedge into the field on the left, and made my way along the ditch until I came to the trees surrounding the cottage.

Here I halted, seeing that a nearer approach was impossible. In the ditch, which was deep and overgrown with blackberry,

and hidden in front by the hedge, I was secure from observation, and I could see the gate of the little cottage garden. To attempt to do more in the broad daylight, and with that fierce brute of a dog at hand, would have meant certain discovery ; so, crouching down in the ditch in as convenient a posture as I could contrive, I fixed my eyes on the garden gate.

I had not very long to wait. Shortly after nine I saw the French Master pass out into the road and make his way towards me. • I crouched still closer and held my breath tight, for I saw that he must pass within a few feet of my hiding place ; but I need not have feared. He walked swiftly, but with agitated, uneven steps, and the abstracted expression of his eyes showed me that he took little heed of his surroundings. His handsome face was pale and drawn ; and indeed I could see that he was but the wreck of the man who had so roughly interposed between Madeleine and myself on the beach that day at Viareggio.

I could comprehend, as I watched him pass, his hands gesticulating, his lips trembling, the wild letter which Mr. Woolmer had forwarded to me ; the man's mad passion was written on his face. Was there

the guilt, the terror of the criminal, written there too? Yes: I was sure of it.

He was gone; and for a long while I was left alone with my thoughts.

How long a time elapsed I know not, for I did not consult my watch, before the sound of a harsh cough made me start. Again the little gate opened, and this time my heart beat faster. It was the man, Ivan.

He came slowly down the lane, dragging himself almost painfully along, and at his heel followed the great wolf-hound.

I looked at the man anxiously and with interest. He appeared to be about fifty; his hair was grey and worn longer than an Englishman would wear it. He was thin to emaciation, and stooped painfully as he walked, drawing his rather shabby clothes round him with a feeble but resigned gesture. As he drew nearer, through the prickly branches of the wild blackberries I could see that his deep-sunk eyes were mild in expression, and that his features were kindly though very sad. Not a man to have assisted Riga in that crime of which I suspected him, but a weak nature, perhaps, to help and pity when the crime was done.

The great dog followed lumberingly a yard or two behind, and as it passed the spot

where I lay hid, its ears pricked and, halting, it growled sullenly. Before I had time, however, to do anything, the man called to it, and with a quick snarl of its sharp teeth and a parting glance at the hedge, it walked on.

I waited a few moments and then, springing from the field, I followed.

I purposely allowed the man and his dog to continue their road down the hedge-bordered lane, on in the direction of the Heath for some distance, without approaching them, for I did not want there to be any likelihood of my being caught by Riga in conversation; but as time went on and the man still held on his painful way, I yet delayed to make my advance. I can hardly say why. It was perhaps some appearance of settled purpose in the carriage of both the man and the beast, some apparent and definite intention, which seemed to tell me that this journey was one often accomplished before, and every step of whose way was familiar.

This impression grew upon me. Ivan looked neither to right nor left of him, but walked steadily, with his head hanging down, and his eyes on the pavement; he knew his route. And the great dog, occasionally

moving in advance, led the way round several corners with a certainty which assured me that the road was familiar to him too.

My curiosity was aroused by this time, and I determined to follow silently and discover the destination of these two. Yet who am I, to take the credit of this determination? Was it not rather fate! that fate which had led me blindly on, captive, bound to its wheels, since that first night in the foggy streets when I had seen Madeleine's sister lying stabbed.

CHAPTER XXI

TOWARDS London, on the way we took, at the end of a quiet street, stands a little secluded church surrounded with tall yew trees and a small shady burial-ground. The church itself is built on a slight eminence from which, down to the street, the little grassy churchyard, dotted with tombstones, slopes.

The consumptive man entered these precincts by an iron gate half hidden in the enclosing wall, and, the dog following, made his way along one of the gravel paths, towards the rear of the building.

There is a fashion, I suppose, in burial-grounds, as in everything else, and a glance at this enclosure told me that it had had its day. There were no children playing there, no visitors bringing wreaths or flowers, no freshly-planted violets or primroses to tell of affection or regrets not yet passed from

memory. The latest figures on the stones which I glanced at appeared to date from a past decade, and the whole place wore, if not a neglected, at least a deserted air. But I could understand, as I looked round me, the charm the spot might have for the consumptive man, himself already in sight of the end. The ground, very uneven, was divided into numerous small hills and valleys, and planted thickly with trees and shrubs, and a better place could hardly be imagined in which to sit and dream away an hour.

I had wandered on, musing, half unconscious of the object of my presence there, when I suddenly discovered that I had lost sight of Ivan and his dog; and I hastened my steps to search for them. As I made my way round to the rear of the church, and down a slope which faced me, I caught sight, through some trees, of a newly white headstone which shone distinctly between some branches, and I made towards it. This must be the explanation of the man's visit here, and of the air of custom which I had noticed in his walk. This new grave would be that of some relative or friend lately lost, and to whose resting-place he made a daily pilgrimage.

After some experiments of the different paths which wound in and out among the trees, I came out at last in a little hollow planted with yews on every side and containing apparently only two graves, the new one which I had noticed and another. The latter stood in the centre of the space ; the new white stone, a flat block of marble surmounted by a white cross, rested in a corner and was enclosed on one side by a thick clump of shrubs about breast high.

There was no sign of Ivan or his dog, but he might be behind these shrubs, and firm in my first theory I strolled towards the spot.

“ *Adèle Ferrière* ”—aged eighteen, and a date a few months previous in the same year ; that was what caught my eye, and held me standing in front of the tall white cross. “ *Adèle Ferrière.* ” Where had I heard that name before ?

Ah, of course ! it was the “ *Adèle* ” which had struck me. *Adèle*. It was the name in Madeleine’s letter—the name of her sister.

And then I felt myself flush suddenly, and then again turn white. “ *Adèle.* ” A young girl ! the age “ eighteen ” and the date—why, the date was within a week of that fatal night ! And this man was here at the

grave ; this man whom I had seen with Riga—who called Riga “Master.” “Adèle Ferrière.” My mind strove to keep pace with the thoughts which crowded through it. Whither had I been led ? What had I discovered ? I must know quickly.

I turned and strode towards the shrubs behind the cross, pushing my way almost roughly through. I must know—I must know.

Then I stopped suddenly, for a hoarse growl reached my ear. But before I had time to realize what it meant it was already too late. Like a flash a huge body sprang from behind the shrubs and the great wolf-hound was upon me. I stepped back, staggered, and fell, and the brute’s paws struck me in the chest, pressing me down, while its jaws sought for my throat.

Half-stunned and breathless, I struggled and squeezed my hands into the loose flesh surrounding its neck ; but the brute snapped at my fingers, making me release my hold, and with the advantage of its sudden attack and strong position threatened for the moment to over-master me.

While we still fought I heard a man shout fiercely to the dog, and I felt its efforts relax. Ivan was tugging at the brute’s collar and forcing it to leave its hold.

Relieved from my assailant, I struggled to my feet, scarcely sure yet whether I had suffered or not from the battle. "You ought to shoot that brute," I commenced, and then stopped hastily, taking a step towards the man ; for he had turned, I saw, deadly pale, and was staggering.

"You must excuse—excuse—Sir—the dog was startled—your sudden appearance—Ah ! I am ill ! "

I stepped forward, but before I could reach him he staggered again and fell full length on the ground.

I hesitated, for a second before I touched him, fearing a second attack from the dog ; but the man's illness had evidently frightened the brute, and it had crouched down by his side, whimpering and pushing its nose against his side.

I raised the helpless form gently, and unfastened the collar which was pressing tightly on the unfortunate man's neck. It was then, for the first time, I noticed that he had apparently broken a blood-vessel, probably from his exertions in subduing the dog. He had fallen face downwards on the slab of the newly-made grave, and the white marble was stained with a pool of blood.

"I did what I could to assist the sick man ;

and, the bleeding having ceased after a time, I took his arm and half carried, half supported him from the cemetery. At the gates we had not long to wait before a cab passed us, and hailing it, I helped the man inside, and got in with him.

During the drive home he contrived to express his gratitude to me for my assistance, compelling the words which he was almost too weak to utter, and staring up at me with pathetically grateful eyes, as if half-surprised that a stranger should take such interest in him.

It was not until we were nearly home that I remembered the dog, and looked out of the window to see if he were still following. Ivan saw my action and guessed its meaning. "You are looking for Boris?" he asked. "Ah, he will not get lost; he knows his way, and sometimes when I am not well enough he goes to the cemetery by himself. He even spends a day there. No one turns him out; he is well known. He was very fond of her. He followed the funeral, and for a long time we could not get him away——"

He stopped, giving a little furtive glance at me, as if he had said too much; but I met his look quite carelessly.

“ You mean the poor young girl buried there ? ” I asked quietly. “ Forgive me—was she a relative of yours ? Your daughter, perhaps ? ”

He had turned rather paler, I noticed, and a weary, sad expression came to his always pathetic face. He hesitated a little. “ She was my wife’s sister,” he said at last.

I appeared not to notice his hesitation. “ And the dog was very attached to her, you say ? ” I continued. “ Not a good tempered animal either, I should imagine.”

The man coloured. “ Oh, sir, Boris is more amiable than you might think. You must have startled him to-day. He is not used to seeing any one near that grave. But it is true he does not like everyone. It was the more strange that he should have been so fond of Mademoiselle. But he used to go with me to the house when I drove the carriage ; and Mademoiselle——”

He stopped suddenly, seized with an attack of coughing ; and then sat looking up at me with an expression of fright on his face.

My heart was beating too fast for me to speak calmly, and a little affected by the man’s own agitation, I was silent, looking out of the window to prevent him seeing my face.

When I turned round again his head had

sunk on to his breast, and but for the nervous movement of his fingers I should have thought him asleep. I was hesitating how far to pursue my questions, when the cab turned into the little lane where the cottage stood, and I saw that the drive was ended.

Before we quite reached the cottage, Ivan roused himself. "Sir," he said quickly, "you have been very good to me." I should like to thank you, but I cannot—you must not come inside. Please stop the cab here; I will get out here."

I obeyed, and the driver pulled up at the side of the road. The consumptive man descended, and stood for a moment looking at me with an imploring, anxious look. "I am grateful, sir," he said at last, speaking good English, but with a strong foreign accent. "I often go to the cemetery—I and Boris. I should like to thank you again. I can't ask you in——," he paused again, with an anxious glance at the little cottage.

I stepped in to aid him in his embarrassment. "I have done nothing at all," I said quickly. "I dare say I may stroll in the direction of the cemetery again. If so, I hope I shall see you; and that you will have recovered your health somewhat."

I guessed that his desire was to avoid letting me into the cottage, and I, on my side, had no wish to meet with the woman of the house again. I felt that I had made a friend of the man, and that my morning might turn out to have been a fortunate one. He appeared relieved at the apparent ease with which I accepted the situation, and with a low bow, he made his way painfully towards the gate of the garden, while I turned, and entering the cab, ordered the man to drive me to my rooms. Once there I flung myself on my knees, and prayed wildly that my hope might not be falsified that fate was helping me to Madeleine's rescue, and tried to struggle against the wild and hopeless longing for her presence, for her sweet loveliness, which ever held possession of my heart.

CHAPTER XXII

I SLEPT little that night. My mind was too full of my adventure of the morning ; my struggle with that fierce dog, and my meeting with Ivan. His words, too, the ideas his hesitating sentences had given rise to, occupied my brain and kept me awake and pondering. Towards morning, however, I fell asleep, and my slumber must have been heavy, for on rising I found that it was quite late in the day, and almost the hour at which my adventure in the cemetery had occurred.

On this occasion, instead of proceeding to the little cottage, I made my way at once in the direction of the secluded burial-ground. The hope seemed almost a wild one, in view of his break-down of the previous day, but I *had* a hope that the consumptive man might be tempted out by the bright morn-

ing, and repeat his visit to the cemetery, and I opened the small iron gate leading to the church with an expectant heart, though I had little idea how much this expedition was in reality to mean to me.

I made my way at once to the rear of the church and in the direction of the new marble stone.

There was no Ivan there, I quickly saw, but a movement among the shrubs and a low growl told me that Boris was present, and perhaps inclined to resent my intrusion on ground which he evidently regarded as private.

To my relief, however, the help I had given to his master on the previous day appeared to have caused a complete change in the dog's opinions concerning me, and he sprang towards me, wagging his tail, on this occasion, and, overwhelming me with lumbering caresses, seated himself eventually at my feet.

I had walked rather rapidly thither, and feeling inclined to rest a moment, I followed the dog's example, and threw myself on the grass. The sun had attained considerable power; and I found the shade from the shrubs at the side of the grave very pleasant, while at the same time I could see quite

plainly down the path in the direction in which any visitor must come.

I had still an idea that Ivan might be at hand, or at least that he might arrive later on ; but as the time passed and no sign of him came, I commenced to let my thoughts wander back to Madeleine, from whom they never strayed far, and to long with an unutterable longing to have her by my side. My poor darling ! to think that she had never even seen this grave—her sister's grave. For how could I doubt whose remains that white stone covered ! Poor Madeleine ! But already I felt that the ~~hour~~ approached when the truth must conquer, when the shadow should be lifted ; and we could come together, hand in hand, to this grave, and she could kneel by its side and pray for the poor girl whose wild love and jealousy had so misled her.

I was aroused from my thoughts by feeling a drop of rain upon my face, and looking up I saw that a heavy cloud had come up rapidly in the sky, with every promise of a severe shower.

I was about to rise and make my way homewards, convinced that my morning had been a failure, when I started and drew back behind the shrubs. Through the leaves I

had caught sight of a man making his way towards the grave, and the sight of this man paralyzed me.

It was Riga, the French Master.

He came rapidly down the path towards the grave, looking eagerly about him as if searching for some one, and I could not doubt that he was seeking Ivan.

I was hidden from him by the shrubs for the present, and I felt thankful for the time allowed me to decide on some course of action; yet he drew nearer, and decide I could not; and the more I thought, the more confused my mind became. I clenched my teeth with exasperation and fury, at last, at the untoward accident. Had he come a few minutes later I should have been gone; now he must see me, and there was an end to all my plans while they were yet undeveloped. My presence here, with the dog Boris, at the grave of his victim, as I felt this tomb to be, would at once disclose to him all my suspicions, all my plan of action. It would, it must drive him to some desperate action; and while my suspicions were still unconfirmed, that action might ruin Madeleine for ever.

Still Riga drew nearer, and Boris pricked up his ears and rose to his feet. We were

both of us invisible to Riga, but I remembered how the dog had growled at him on that night when I had looked through the cottage window, and although I knew that I must eventually be discovered, I seized the brute's collar, and forced him down beside me. He submitted patiently enough, apparently comprehending my wishes, and quite resigned to taking me for his master for the time ; but his upper lip was, raised quiveringly, showing one of his long—white tusks, and the hair on his neck rose into bristles as he watched Riga approach the grave.

And then occurred a strange and terrible incident ; an incident so strange and terrible, and of such tremendous bearing on the future, that I half hesitate as I write it down ; that even to this day I hesitate to ponder upon, so direct and fearful an interposition did it seem.

As I peered through the bushes, still uncertain, Riga came swiftly down the grassy slope of the little hollow. His face was eager, but not anxious, and the neighbourhood of this grave, which should have meant so much to him, apparently affected him little. I fancy he must have caught a glimpse of myself, or perhaps of Boris' tawny coat, for

his eyes were fixed on the spot where we crouched. The rain was now falling rapidly in a pelting shower, wetting the grass and making it slippery. And as Riga reached the marble slab of the grave his foot slipped and he fell across the stone upon his hands and knees. .

He rose quickly to his knees again, with a little exclamation, and looked at his hands, and then down on the stone at his feet. I followed his glance, and shuddered. His hands were covered with blood ; and blood was on the stone.

Casting aside the sudden horror which had seized me, I recognized the cause of the phenomenon. The blood from Ivan's lips on the previous day had flowed on to the stone and had dried there. The heavy rain had now dissolved it, and it ran in little rivulets along the white marble — but I shivered as I looked at Riga.

He was staring from his stained hands to the stone and back again in a dazed way, as if hardly comprehending what had happened.

“ Why, the very grave-stone bleeds when I touch it,” he said quietly, looking round him. And then suddenly a grey mask seemed to drop over his face, and his eyes dilated with horror.

"Why, good God!" he repeated, but this time in a shriek, "the very grave bleeds when I touch it!" And he sprang wildly to his feet, to rush from the spot. But he was too late.

In the excitement and horror of the scene I had relaxed my hold on Boris' collar. A yell from the brute, as if in response to Riga's shriek, made me turn, but it was useless. Either Riga's terror, or the smell of blood, or old antipathy, seemed to have driven the dog mad, and the French Master's staggering rush from the grave only served to bring his fate upon him.

Before I could move the huge beast had hurled itself upon the miserable wretch who, unable to keep his footing on the slippery grass, and half paralyzed with his terror, fell helpless. In an instant the dog's teeth met in his throat, and the two rolled ever and over, Riga stabbing wildly at the brute's back with a knife which he had had the presence of mind to draw from his pocket.

Horror-struck, I rushed to the man's help, but it was too late. When I reached the spot the struggle was finished. Boris lay quivering on the ground, evidently dying, but his teeth were still clenched in his vic-

tim's throat, and a glance at Riga's face told me that he was dead.

I suppose my anxiety of the past weeks must have sapped my strength to a greater extent than I could have dreamed possible; and this, together with the awful occurrence of the past few minutes, have overcome me, for as I looked down upon the huge dead brute, and from it into Riga's staring upturned eyes, I turned sick and giddy.

Startled, I caught hold of the cold white marble near me, and attempted to pull myself together, but I felt the whole world reeling round me.

In another moment I had fallen insensible, and for a time I knew nothing more.

* * * * *

When I recovered my senses again, several men were standing round me. One of them, I saw, was a police constable. He had apparently been engaged in undoing my collar and tie, and in doing his best to bring me round.

When he saw that I had opened my eyes again, and was attempting to sit up, he appeared relieved and, rising, he motioned back the little knot of observers.

"Are you better, sir," he asked. "Can you sit up, and look about you a bit?"

I struggled up. "Yes, thank *vous*. I am better—I am all right now," I gasped. "I must have fainted. That—that—accident—"

"Accident—was it?" said the man quickly. "You aren't hurt, too, are you? What's been the matter here? Mad dog, was it? The brute's mangled this poor gentleman seemingly."

I hesitated for a second. "Yes, the dog attacked the gentleman," I said at last. "It was a savage brute. I don't know whether it was mad, but it sprang at him. They rolled over and over struggling. Ri—The gentleman had a knife in his pocket fortunately and he killed the brute——"

"Not much fortune about it," said the constable quickly, with a glance at Riga's inanimate form.

"Yes, the poor fellow's dead," said one of the men standing near. "He killed the dog, and the dog killed him, seemingly. Shall we go on, Constable?"

The constable nodded, and the men proceeded to place Riga's body upon a stretcher which they had with them, after covering it carefully with a long coat. While, still dazed and confused as I was, I looked on with a shudder. ..

"Who found us?" I asked, turning to

the policeman, and trying to pull myself together, though miserably sick and shaken.

"One of the men employed here, sir," he replied. "He thought he heard a cry and a scuffle, and then he saw the dog go for the gentleman; but, like yourself, he was too late to do anything to help. That's him over there in front, helping to carry the stretcher."

"And now where are they going?" I asked.

"Well, they're going to the station first. But, as I daresay you know, sir—for I take it you were a friend of the poor gentleman's, weren't you?—he lives in Gower Street."

I started, but restrained myself. Then Riga had not lived at the little cottage after all.

"Yes," continued the constable, as we reached the gate, "we found his address in his pockets. You won't mind just stepping along with us, sir, and telling the inspector what you told me?"

I nodded, and we walked on. At the police-station, which we soon reached, I told my story, which was confirmed by the man who had seen Boris fly at Riga; and after a short time I was permitted to go home,

being warned that my presence ~~would~~ be required at the inquest that ~~must~~ be held shortly.

I let myself into my rooms, feeling anxious and upset. Riga's terrible death had shocked me fearfully, as was only natural, and other doubts were numerous and harassing. How would this affect Madeleine? Riga, the man whose accusation confirming her confession might have ruined her, was dead. But, on the other hand, his death had also taken the evidence which could free her. And then my thoughts flew to Ivan. Now that the "Master" whom he evidently so loved was gone, would he speak? Did he, as I suspected, indeed know the truth? If he did not, if Mr. Woolmer and I were wrong in our suspicions, where should we look for hope?

In any case I saw that I had no time for hesitation. My first thought was to search my pockets. The constable and the men with him had searched Riga for his address. Had they done the same to me? A hasty examination relieved my mind a little. There was nothing about me which could tell my real name. My pockets contained merely my watch and a plain cigarette case; and my handkerchief bore no initials. They knew

me at present only as "Mr. Williams." But how long could I hope to retain that identity?

I remembered that I was sought for in connexion with Madeleine's case. It was merely accident that I had not been discovered sooner. Could I escape recognition if I attended the inquest, and gave public evidence? It was hardly possible. No, I must act at once if I meant to do anything; and, deciding to put all to the risk, I set out hastily for Hampstead.

My plan was to offer the couple who lived in the cottage money up to any sum I possessed, and if that failed I had determined to resort to threats to obtain the knowledge I sought. I felt instinctively that I might contrive something with Ivan, but of the woman I was more doubtful; and it was with hesitating fingers that I knocked for the second time in my life at the little cottage door.

No one replied to my summons, though I repeated it twice, and I felt my heart sink as I saw how deserted the place appeared. The door was locked, I found by experiment, and no sound came from within. Everything seemed to say that the house was empty and that my hopes were futile.

I knocked again, waking the echoes, while my mind worked anxiously. Was it possible that these people had heard the news already and had fled the place? or were they hiding purposely?

I grew desperate, at last, the silence acting on nerves already overstrained. What did this strange stillness mean? I could bear it no longer. Muttering a prayer, I put my shoulder to the door, and in a minute or so contrived to burst the lock.

As the noise of the splintering wood rang through the silent house I fancied I heard a groan come from the upper floor of the cottage, and I quickly mounted the stairs. As I reached the landing the sound was repeated, and, making for a closed door on the right hand, I opened it and looked in.

The trees outside the house darkened the window and the room was dimly lighted; but on the bed I saw a shadowy figure, and I strode towards it. It was Ivan—deserted, alone. Was he dead or alive?

A low sigh and a slight movement replied to my question. He was still living; but as I drew the curtain from the window, trying to throw more light upon the bed, I saw that I had arrived but just in time. Emaci-

ated as he had been before, he seemed to have grown still more frail during the past two days ; his breathing was fluttering and difficult, and for a moment I fancied there was no consciousness in his eyes.

As I leant over the bed, however, his gaze became intelligent, and he raised his head feebly, with the pathetic gratitude of the day before showing in his sad brown eyes. Then a change came over his face, and he uttered some word, which I could not catch, in a quick, agitated whisper.

I stooped lower over the bed and bent my ear. "Notary—don't you understand," he whispered. "A notary—a—a lawyer."

I felt my heart leap. "A lawyer? you want a lawyer?"

"Yes, a lawyer. Quick—something I must say—before she—she comes back."

"She? You mean your wife? She has gone out?"

"Yes—she will return soon—the lawyer must come—I must see him before she comes back—it would be too late then."

I hesitated. It must be some distance to the nearest lawyer's ; but a doctor, or indeed any responsible person, would do as well, if it was a confession he desired to make. I fancied I had seen a red lamp outside a

house a quarter of a mile or so away, in the direction of the city; but the man was sinking fast, I could see. Would he live till I came back?

I looked quickly round me. The man followed the direction of my glance.

"Brandy," he whispered. "In the cupboard—I will live—don't be afraid—if only she does not return."

I went to the cupboard and, finding a bottle of brandy and a glass, I gave him a small quantity, holding it to his lips, and watching him as he drank. The spirit revived him, and his hands began to clench and unclench themselves nervously. He made a feeble clutch at my sleeve. "Master—master—forgive me," he murmured; and then to me—"Don't go—don't go."

I saw that the brandy had revived his courage, or his determination to still shield Riga, and I decided rapidly. "Your master is dead," I said. "He died this morning."

His head sank suddenly on his breast and his hands ceased to move. I feared that I had killed him. But after a moment he looked up again, tears in his eyes.

"Then it matters nothing," he said. "Go

—go, and bring the notary—I can die in peace.”

I cast another glance at him, and then flew down the stairs. Should I be in time? Would he live till I returned?

CHAPTER XXIII

NEVER shall I forget that run along the little lane, and down the road towards the doctor's house. "Should I be in time—should I be in time?" The thought kept hammering at my brain. It was indeed a run for life or death, for it was Madeleine's life which depended on my efforts.

Madeleine, my wife, my darling!—should I be in time to save her? Should I be in time to prove the evidence that would save her perhaps from death—that would free her from prison and give her back to my arms, never more to leave them?

And then came the deadly fear—if the doctor were not at home?

But that fear, at least, had no foundation. As I drew near the red lamp which I had before noticed, I saw a young man in a professional-looking tall hat and frock coat run lightly up the steps and take out a latch-key. •

He turned when I called after him breathlessly and descended to meet me.

He was a young man with a good-natured clever face ; and when he heard my story he quickly volunteered to set out with me.

“ I will come with you without a moment’s delay,” he said quickly. “ Can you run ?—but I see you have been doing something of that kind already.”

I nodded. “ I will run as fast as you like,” I said eagerly. “ Do you mind ? ”

“ Well, I used to do a little of it at the ‘Varsity,” he said with a smile. “ The man will have taken my horse out of the trap by now, and we can get there quicker on foot. Are you ready ? ”

I blessed him in my heart for his ready good nature—for who knew what a moment’s delay might mean?—and we strode along side by side.

“ I don’t know what my patients will think of me,” he said after a time, tearing along at a pace which, after my former exertions, left me breathless. “ But after all, perhaps, you know, it’s a good advertisement to see a doctor running like this for a patient.”

“ I shall never forget your kindness, at any rate,” I murmured. “ It is a matter of life

and death to more than the sick man we are going to see."

"I only hope we shall be in time," he returned. "But we must waste no more breath."

We reached the cottage at last. Leaving him for a moment, I hastened on before. I took the stairs almost at a stride, but even as I gained the landing I felt my heart sink and almost cease to beat.

Something—was it the strange hush which always surrounds a house where one lies dead?—was it some inexplicable mysterious instinct?—told me that I was too late.

Almost involuntarily I slackened my footsteps, hushed my tread and, taking my hat from my head, I entered Ivan's room.

A glance at the white face and rigid form which now lay on the bed told me that my premonition was correct. Ivan was dead. The poor suffering, and perhaps sinning wretch who had begged me to make easier his last moments, had ceased to suffer or sin now. He was dead—and his confession had died with him.

I was glaring at him wildly, filled with the thought of what all this meant to me, when the sound of the doctor's hurried breathing behind me made me turn.

He had come upstairs after me. He walked swiftly to the bed, gave a glance at Ivan's motionless form, and then turned to me with a pitying glance.

"Too late! I am so sorry," he said kindly. "But you certainly did your best. If you don't mind I will make a brief examination. It will be necessary."

He must have noticed my dazed condition, but he kindly refrained from remarking on it, and, relieved at the chance he offered me, I turned to the door.

"Yes, thanks," I murmured. "Do as you wish. I think I will go downstairs for a little while. You will find me there."

Then, hardly aware of what I did, I staggered rather than walked from the room.

I scarcely know how I made my way downstairs, and into the little half-sitting-room, half-kitchen, into which I had looked that day when I had first seen this cottage. I know I found myself at last, seated in an armchair by the empty fireplace, gazing stupidly before me with a whirling brain.

"Madeleine is in prison—Madeleine is in prison!"—the words kept dancing before my eyes. "She has accused herself of murder, and the only two people who could say that she is innocent are dead!"

I buried my face in my hands as if I could shut out the horrible words which it seemed to me some mocking fiend was repeating with infernal persistency.

* * * * *

Suddenly I lifted my head and listened. A strange sound had reached my ears, and still seemed to be repeated.

I started to my feet. Was I mad, and was it I, myself, that wept, sobbed on with that dull heart-broken monotony, or was there some one else near me—some soul as harassed as my own? But that was impossible. The doctor, I knew, was upstairs with the dead body. Save for him and myself the house was empty.

But the sound continued.

I rose and looked about me. There was no one in the kitchen save myself, but the sound was very near me. Whence did it come?

There were three doors in the room, and I opened two of them. They were cupboards merely. At the third one I stopped a second. The moment my fingers touched the handle I knew that there must be a room beyond, and that it was from this room that the sound must come.

Then I opened the door. As I entered the

apartment, which was a dark little chamber looking on to a dense privet-hedge, a figure rose hastily and faced me. It was the woman—Ivan's wife—and for a moment we stared at one another.

Her sleek dark hair, always before so neat, was disarranged, I noticed, beneath her nurse's head-dress: one hand was held to her throat, clutching it, and her eyes were filled with tears.

As she recognized me, however, she drew herself together with an evident effort, and her handsome face partly recovered its usual cold expression.

"Ah, it is the English gentleman who was always wanting to ask questions," she said with a little ironical note in her voice. "And what may the English gentleman want here again? Has he by any chance come to ask those questions of my husband to-day of all days?"

I watched her sternly, pausing before I replied.

"Yes, I came for that," I said at last.

She flashed round on me. "Then you are a fool for your pains, English gentleman," she hissed, "for he is dead."

Almost as she uttered the words her face changed and, turning from me, she flung

herself into a chair, burying her face in her hands.

“Ah, yes, he is dead—and he, my darling, is dead too,” she murmured. “And I am still alive. God! is it possible? He, so handsome, so strong, so grand! Ah! I would believe in a heaven which would give him back to me!”

Her voice faded into an inarticulate murmur of caressing phrases and extravagant grief, to which she gave free course; and I stood watching her uncertainly, resenting her contemptuous ignoring of my presence, yet at a loss in what way to force her to recognize it.

“I know your husband is dead,” I said at last; “I saw him before he died.”

She raised her head slightly and appeared to listen, but her face was still turned from me.

“He sent me for a lawyer—or a doctor,” I continued. “He wished to speak, to tell me something in the presence of witnesses before he died.”

Her contemptuous laugh interrupted me. “And you were too late with your lawyer and your doctor,” she said quickly. “How sad—for you. I pity you. Accept my condolences for yourself and—and for your wife.”

I saw her shoulders shaking beneath her black cashmere bodice, and her laughter maddened me. "Woman!" I cried fiercely, clenching my hands.

Her hateful laugh rang out again. "Englishman!" she said, imitating my voice; and then, shrugging her shoulders, she buried her face in her hands again. "Ah, fool, fool, fool!" she murmured, "and it is to a country of such men that he came to die—my Riga!"

I moved a step nearer to her. "Yes, your husband is dead—and this Riga is dead, but ~~can~~ you answer those questions?" I said quietly.

She raised her head again very slightly.

"Well? And if I could?"

• "Can you?"

"Yes."

• "Will you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "That depends," she said softly.

I gave an exclamation of joy. "Ah, what is it you want to do so?" I cried. "Money? How much? Listen: I am well off. You need not fear to ask. What shall I give you?"

"I will tell you," she answered, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Give me Riga back—give me my lover back again, and I will give you yours."

And then as I started forward in sudden anger, she rose and faced me.

"Ah, you fool!" she cried. "Do you think I don't see through you—do you think I don't know you! You are the husband of that proud beauty who made him mad! But it is through her—through her—do you understand—that he is dead—he who was worth a million of you and your pale-faced bride! Your bride! Ha, ha! Well, your bride is in prison, and she shall stay there! She shall die—do you hear?—she shall die. Go and rot with her!" And turning her back again she walked to the window, and stood looking out into the road.

But her treatment had roused my wrath, and her mention of Madeleine had maddened me. I strode forward and, gripping her shoulder, swung her round to face me. For a moment her eyes defied mine, and then the expression on my face must have terrified her, for I had forgotten she was a woman; and, her gaze sinking, she turned white.

I tightened my grasp of her flesh, and spoke slowly and distinctly.

"You shall tell me all you know, or I will kill you where you stand," I said. "But first you shall beg my wife's pardon."

Her eyes wandered to the door, after a

faint attempt to meet mine. "The doctor," she gasped—"he will help me."

"The doctor is upstairs," I returned quietly. "Before he could come to your help you would be dead. It is my wife's life or yours—choose!"

Again her eyes sought mine, but she saw death written there, and she trembled.

"Apologize to my wife," I repeated.

She shook herself with a miserable attempt at her old manner. "Oh, I apologize to Madame," she said at last.

"Now the answers to the questions," I said.

I was a desperate man, and she knew it. My hand gripped her shoulder, not six inches from her throat, and my eyes glared into hers. "The answers," I repeated.

For a second she resisted still, and then she shrugged her shoulders. "Ah, bah, why not after all!" she said with an effort at a smile, which failed through the trembling of her lips. "What does it matter now? After all, you are a lover worth helping. I like such men as you. And in any case she can't have him now."

"Then you decide to yield?" I asked, my hand still holding her.

"Oh, yes. You have conquered! Go,

fetch your lawyer, or your doctor. I will make you happy."

I released her, but I would not leave her, and going to the door, I called upstairs, asking the doctor to come down to me.

The moment I had done so it struck me how easily the woman might defy me under the shelter of his presence, and how feeble any future threats against her would be. Fortunately, however, my fears were in vain. Either she fancied that I was determined enough to hunt her down afterwards in any case to carry out my threats, or she had in reality decided that, Riga being dead, she had no interest in keeping any longer the secret which affected Madeleine.

The doctor stared from her to me when he entered the room—a little surprised, I fancy, at our evident discomposure—but the woman recovered her calmness almost at once, and bowed to him with her cool smile.

"This gentleman wants you to listen to a story which I have to tell, and which he is most anxious to hear," she said. "You understand it concerns Madame, his wife, and as husbands you Englishmen are superb: as lovers, well, forgive me! you are a little——"

The doctor frowned slightly at her speech and tone, and turned to me.

"Is it true you wish me to hear what this lady says?" he asked quietly. I could see that the woman's manner had not at all prepossessed him in her favour.

"Thank you, yes, if you do not mind. But that is hardly the way to put it," I said. "The fact is that Madame has some evidence to give, of inestimable importance to myself. Accidents may happen—they have happened"—I nodded in the direction of the room upstairs—"I want Madame's statement witnessed. It had better be taken down——"

"I write shorthand," he put in.

"You are exceedingly obliging," I said gratefully. "Then may I trouble you to take a note of what Madame says?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders and laughed slightly. "I commence to think that this resembles a court of law," she said, "and that I have been foolish, but bah, Monsieur le Medecin, really this gentleman is so amiable that I can refuse him nothing."

The woman's sudden changes from bitter grief to cool effrontery commenced to disgust me, and I motioned to the doctor to seat himself at the table. "Now, Madame, we are ready," I said.

With a contemptuous grimace in my direction, she seated herself, facing the doctor,

taking, I noticed, as attractive an attitude as possible, and smoothing her hair under her neat cap.

It was a strange situation this, a strange scene, and one which I can never forget. I see now the half-darkened chamber, with the wind faintly moving the twigs of the privet-hedge outside ; the doctor, seated at the table, writing rapidly ; the woman dark, handsome, reptile-like, but ogling, making eyes at the doctor, making eyes at me, smoothing her hair, glancing at her little patent-leather shoes, smiling coquettishly, while upstairs lay her husband not an hour dead. A strange woman, for the grief she had shown for Riga's death had been terribly genuine. A strange story that she told, made stranger still that through it ran the undercurrent of this woman's coquetry, her evident desire to fascinate either or both of those men who, as her tale progressed, would, I believe, rather have caressed a snake or lizard than have given her an answering glance.

She commenced :—

“ The story—I beg pardon, the evidence—begins, so far as this gentleman (Mr. Ensor) is concerned, nearly a year ago. It was then that I married my husband. It is he who

lies upstairs. Why I married him is of no interest to you. I had my reasons. Love was not one of them. I am a qualified hospital nurse—French, thank God, but with English experience. I have nursed at—but that does not matter either. We will say two of your principal hospitals. At the time I married him my husband had just taken the position of coachman to a Monsieur Riga. Monsieur Riga might take—might have taken a grander name, a much grander name, but what would you ? he had no money. But he had once had money, and he had once had estates, and it was, on these estates, in the time of his father, that my husband was born. He had been the serf of Monsieur Riga's father ; he considered himself the chattel of Monsieur Riga. It was only natural, therefore, when Monsieur Riga married and set up a house for himself, that my husband should be the first to join his household. This household comprised several other servants ; my husband chose them from among his compatriots.

“ Monsieur Riga made a mistake in his marriage. He married a pretty doll, thinking she had money. When he found out what she was——”

“ Madame——” I commenced.

The woman gave me an ironical glance. "I beg your pardon, sir. I forgot that Madame Riga was a connexion of yours. Let us say that he married a lovely and *amiable* young lady who made his life a heaven to him—but what would you? Gentlemen are gentlemen"—she affected a demure smile—"we poor women grow wearisome, and Monsieur Riga grew cold even to the paragon of beauty he had married. He took a fancy for another lady——"

"Will you kindly come to your story?" I said sternly, repressing my anger with an effort, for her tone was madly insulting.

"*Really*, my good gentleman—I do not see how I can tell my story without offending your susceptibilities. We will say that another lady, quite unintentionally, fascinated him, temporarily—he only *really* loved once."

She sighed, and went on. "Madame Riga became jealous. She was of a passionate disposition—those doll-women sometimes are—for the moment. There were quarrels, reproaches.—Are you married, doctor? No? Ah! *You* are, Mr. Ensor. Then you will understand me. The other lady—*really*, I don't quite see how to tell this story—the other lady was cold as marble, but

Madame Riga was mad—mad with jealousy and suspicion. I am not surprised. Riga was a man to send a woman mad. The other lady would have left, but Madame Riga persuaded her to stay. One evening my husband was ordered to drive the carriage to the theatre. Madame Riga and the other lady—well, if you wish it, Miss Lennard—and Monsieur Riga were inside. On leaving the theatre the city was shrouded in a dense fog—one of your English fogs. My husband lost his way on the road home. He descended from his seat to enquire where he was. Monsieur Riga also got out of the carriage. After a time he came round to the window on the side where Miss Lennard was seated. He—well, he said or did something foolish, and Madame Riga saw him. She was, and had been for months, mad—mad with jealousy. This brought on a crisis. She took a little dagger from her hair and tried to stab herself. Miss Lennard seized her hand—— Shall I go on, Monsieur ? ” she continued, with a mocking glance at me.

“Woman ! ” I cried, “ Take care ! you will drive me mad ! ”

The doctor looked up surprised from his writing ; but seeing the emotion written on my face he turned again.

The woman laughed lightly. "You would prefer my story not to take the *feuilleton* form?" she said. "Yet the *Petit Parisien* has made a fortune from those wonderful stories of—I forget his name. Well, Miss Lennard seized Madame's hand with the dagger in it. There was a struggle, and Miss Lennard fainted. Monsieur Riga had opened the carriage door to come also to his wife's assistance. But his wife was mad. She turned on him furious, insane. She reproached him; she declared she would leave him; she swore to ruin him in some way or other in which it seems she thought she had the power. He was quick-tempered; it was in his blood. There was a quarrel and—and after all what matters it, for he is dead! Yes! He killed her. It was only what she had tried to do to herself a minute earlier."

I gave a gasp of relief. Innocent! Madeleine was innocent! My darling was saved.

The woman was looking at me curiously. "You thank me?" she asked with her hateful smile. "You are grateful to the woman whom you were going to kill a minute ago? Ah! it is not only foreigners who can kill from love or hate. It seems the English, cold as they are, are capable also of going to extremes. I admire you for it, Monsieur,

and I envy Madame. We women are not always loved as we deserve. Well, to my story, though really I would rather not tell this part. Your laws, you English, are so strange. My husband, the coachman, had returned to the carriage while the second quarrel was going on, and stood looking on dismayed—he was a weak creature. He saw Madame's death, or rather he saw her stabbed, for she did not die then, and his first thought was to shield his master.

• “Monsieur Riga was overcome when he recognized what he had done; but he had the presence of mind after a second or so to divert suspicion from himself by disposing of the dagger. Madame Riga had attempted to stab herself—well, no one but he and my husband could say she had not succeeded. Half averting his eyes, he leaned over the body and placed the dagger, as he thought, in her clenched hand. But the interior of the brougham was dark, and his nerves were, I suppose, upset. At that minute the two men heard a swift movement in the carriage. Miss Lennard had recovered her senses. In the excitement of the moment, uncertain what she had seen, my husband drew Monsieur Riga back from the carriage. The fog was so dense that they could not be

visible two yards from the carriage while they kept outside the radius of the lamps. They heard a shriek from Miss Lennard ; they saw her rush from the carriage with the dagger in her hand ; they saw her, after looking wildly round, seize one of the lamps and return to Madame's help. Madame had by this time recovered from the first insensibility caused by the shock of her wound.

Miss Lennard leaned over her and attempted, I believe, to stop the bleeding ; but the amiable Madame Riga apparently still harboured feelings of resentment against her sister and blamed her for her death, as she had blamed her in the first place for the loss of Monsieur Riga's affections. " Murderess ! " she cried, as her sister approached her, " now are you glad ! "

" These words, to any one who knew the whole history of the case, would have been but the outburst of a jealous spite ; but they struck Miss Lennard very differently.

" By this time, however, my husband had become aware that footsteps were approaching the carriage. Some one had evidently heard the screams of the two women, and was making his way towards the scene, through the fog. My husband, terrified, sprang to the box of the carriage. Monsieur

Riga ran round quickly to the side on which the stranger was approaching. A man was standing there, looking into the brougham. Monsieur Riga was a man of courage and instant resource. Without a moment's hesitation, he seized the stranger, who expected no attack, and flung him roughly away from the brougham; then he jumped to my husband's side and flogged the horse, which galloped off. They were quickly lost in the fog, which seemed every moment to become denser. When it cleared at last they found themselves not far from my husband's cottage; that is to say, this house where we now are. They decided to halt and deliberate.

“When they descended from the box they found Madame Riga insensible, and Miss Lennard raving in delirium. It appeared that, finding the dagger in her hand, and hearing her sister's bitter words—words which sounded to her like an accusation—this young lady had gained the terrible impression that she had been the cause of the tragedy.

“Miss Lennard had fascinated—I should say, Monsieur Riga was fascinated with Miss Lennard, and it suited his purposes to foster this impression even after she recovered from her delirium. Meanwhile I nursed Madame

Riga in this cottage. I wish to ask for no credit, but I did my best to save her life. After all, I am no murderess, whatever my faults may be. But she never recovered, and in a week she was dead.

“My husband and I were equally determined to save Monsieur Riga from danger. It did not suit Monsieur ‘Riga’s’ purpose to publicly accuse Miss Lennard of the crime which he was privately quite ready to permit her to believe she had committed. What was to be done? It was the moment for a woman’s ready wit to intervene. I intervened. It was to me that Monsieur Riga in the end owed his safety. •

“I was nursing at the hospital at the time that all this occurred. Among the doctors there, there was a young house-surgeon who was—ahem!—so foolish as to admire me. Admiration is never disagreeable to a true woman, and perhaps I encouraged the boy. He was simple, and very much in love as well. When it was quite certain that Madame Riga was dying I sent for him and told him a little romance: ‘My sister Adèle Ferrière was engaged—to Monsieur Riga. They were to have been married, but Adèle was of a jealous and passionate disposition. The lovers had had a quarrel, and there had been an

accident. My sister had seized a little dagger from her hair, and somehow it had pierced her side.' He understood precisely what I wanted him to understand—he understood that she had committed suicide.

"Monsieur Riga and my husband bore out my story, and, as I say, the poor fellow was very much in love. The girl was dead; it was evident that she had killed herself. Why bring scandal upon a worthy family and drag a broken-hearted lover's story before the stern and unromantic Courts? Why indeed? He gave a certificate of death from an ailment of the chest—she was *poitrinaire* in any case—and 'my sister' Adèle Ferrière was disposed of.

"There remained Miss Lennard to arrange for, and also Monsieur Riga's house and servants. The latter case was simple. As I have said, my husband had engaged the servants, who were compatriots of his own, and quite subservient to him. At his command they dispersed silently, and the house returned to its owner's hands. As Monsieur Riga was never seen there again it did not surprise any one that Madame was not seen either.

"As for Miss Lennard, she had been dangerously ill—dangerously that is to say, as

far as her reason was concerned. She had never recovered her senses after that night when her sister had been stabbed, and to our dismay she raved continually of the deed she supposed herself to have committed, and of the last words of her sister, which appeared to ring always in her ears.

"It was unsafe to keep her in England. What was to be done with her? At any moment she might recover, and create a scandal which could easily be fatal to us, for we remembered uncomfortably the stranger who had appeared so mysteriously by the brougham that night in the fog.

"Again I stepped in. I donned my costume of nurse. Under my charge, Miss Lennard was escorted to Dover, and thence to Calais.

"I had a friend in France who kept a 'Maison de Santé,' where I had nursed formerly. When Miss Lennard recovered her senses she found herself in this house. The rest of the story, I fancy, you know. At all events it is not of any importance. And now, gentlemen, I must really beg you to excuse me. You have learned all that I can tell you, and I have some business of my own to attend to, some preparations to make. I must confess that I do not like your rather triste country. This place also gets on my

nerves—and—and my heart is broken. I am going to France—my native land. When I get sad it seems to call me. I want its warmth, its light, its gaiety. I want to leave all your fogs, your bitter winds, your cold compatriots behind me. I——”

She stopped suddenly, for a step sounded in the next room, and the door opened suddenly.

A tall pale man, with a military bearing and a heavy moustache, looked in and took a swift and comprehensive glance of the three of us. Then he walked inside and closed the door carefully after him.

“Ah!” he said, and he calmly took a seat facing us.

The doctor and I glanced enquiringly at Madame, but she in her turn looked rather anxiously at the stranger.

“May I venture to ask what you want, sir?” she said at last. “Are you a friend of Mr. Ensor?”

The man looked at her enquiringly. “Mr. Ensor?” he asked.

Madame gave a gesture in my direction. “Or of the doctor?” she continued.

“The doctor?” the man repeated, following her glance.

“I am Doctor Dennis,” said the doctor

shortly, meeting his glance. "No, Madame, I do not know this gentleman," he added.

The stranger looked round the room calmly. "Let me see," he said quietly. "Mr. Ensor—Doctor Dennis—Madame—what may your name be, Madame? Might it be Ivanowitch?"

Madame looked at him sharply. "I suppose you know already," she said curtly. "So there is no need for me to tell you."

"Yes, that's all right," replied the stranger. "And my name's Sergeant Dove of the Criminal Investigation Department. Now we all know one another. I'm looking for a gentleman named Riga. A little matter of evidence——"

"He is dead," said Madame quickly, almost with a touch of triumph. "He died to-day."

Mr. Dove looked from me to the doctor interrogatively. I nodded.

"Ah!" he said at last. "Well, perhaps you can help me somewhere else Madame. I am also looking for a gentleman by the name of Ivanowitch. A little matter of evidence."

"He is dead," I said quickly. "He died upstairs, not an hour ago."

Mr. Dove's eyes carefully avoided mine

this time, and sought the doctor's, who bent his head in acquiescence.

Mr. Dove looked angry. "Oh!" he said, after a moment's pause. Then he looked round the room. "I suppose none of you happen to be dead as well, do you?" he asked ironically. "Sure? Mr. Ensor? Is that right? That your name? Trouble you. Little matter of evidence—connected with matter you applied to North London Police Station about some time ago. Madame Ivanowitch—trouble you too. Little matter of evidence connected with young lady's confession of murder. We've been a long time looking you up—you and your husband. Never mind, better late than never. Doctor Dennis—well, don't know if I can trouble you—perhaps you have something you would like to say?" he paused interrogatively.

Doctor Dennis looked at me.

"Doctor, you'll keep that writing, as you would your life, won't you?" I said quickly.

The doctor nodded. "I am ready to help in any way I can, Mr. Ensor," he said readily.

Mr. Dove opened the door, and called softly. A policeman entered, and stood with his back to the door. Mr. Dove stepped lightly up the cottage stairs. In a moment or two he returned, looking rather paler.

"What's that the doctor's been taking down?" he whispered confidentially to me.

"Has she given it away?"

"Yes, the doctor has Madame's story written down," I said.

"You've done well," he returned, with a dig of his elbow in my direction. "With Mr. Ivanowitch dead, and the other chap deceased, we might have had some trouble over this business yet. Now, Madame"—he turned to Madame, who regarded him with cold fixedness—"I'll trouble you to step along with us."

Madame bit her lip. "And your authority?" she said quickly. "Your papers—your—what do you call it?"

"Warrant? Oh, that's all right. Here it is. 'In connexion with the Belfort Road Murder.' But don't you think we think you murdered anybody. We only want you to tell us all about it. Bill, the lady waits. Gentlemen, if you *don't* mind?"

CHAPTER XXIV

At last !

Ah, never shall I forget the day when I knew at length that every suspicion which had connected Madeleine with the mysterious tragedy of the fog had passed away, and that as soon as the necessary formalities had been completed she would be at once set at liberty.

Madame Riga's evidence, unwillingly as it had been given, left no doubt in the minds of the authorities that Madeleine had accused herself wrongfully of that terrible crime ; and to my joy I saw their knowledge reflected in her features.

I was in Court when the full knowledge of Riga's villainy and treachery, as well as of her own error, came upon her—for I cared little now who recognized me, and the sight made my heart beat with joy, even while the paleness of her sweet sad face caused my eyes to swim.

For a moment she staggered, and I thought she was about to fall, but her wonderful courage, in face of all that crowd of curious onlookers, stood her in good stead. She did indeed for one moment clutch the barrier of the dock, but only for a moment; then she turned her lovely face towards heaven, and I saw by the movement of her lips that she was murmuring a prayer.

I turned and buried myself among the crowd at the back of the Court for fear that next her eyes should wander in that direction and meet mine. I did not want that to happen yet. I did not want our first sweet talk—for eyes can speak in such a case, and ours would have said so much—to take place there, in that horrible spot where she had suffered so fearfully, where she had so nearly thrown her life away, where I had feared that she might be taken from me altogether.

I had a better place for our first meeting than that—a creeper covered cottage among the woods in the heart of Warwickshire—a nest on which I had lavished all the thought and care the most devoted lover could squander on the spot which should be going to see his hopes fulfilled. It was there that we were going to meet again, but with how much more vivid, more deep a joy than any

lover could meet a mistress with, who had loved only in happiness, and who met him there but for the first time!

If it is true that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, what is it to have loved and lost and found again—found again after almost every hope had been lost, after the dread gates of death—and such a death—had opened wide?

* * * * *

“Ah, Laurence, my darling, it is almost terrible,” Madeleine answered when I asked her the question, when first we could speak again coherently, or do anything but clasp hands and gaze into each other’s eyes, as if we feared each moment to be dragged apart again. “There is almost a fear about such joy, but heaven will not grudge it to us, Lawrence, for it is so much of it gratitude to God!”

* * * * *

Some time after, when the present happiness had brought the smile back again to Madeleine’s sweet face, when the prettiness of our cottage and the peace of its surroundings had given rest to her heart which had suffered so much, I took Madeleine with me to London, and we visited together the little cemetery in Hampstead and the grave

of the unfortunate girl whose short life had ended so tragically.

I had assured myself beforehand that all traces of Riga's awful death had been long ago obliterated. There were no signs now on the pure white marble of the headstone of the bloodstains which had so mysteriously and tragically brought about his death. Kind hands had planted flowers round the little cross, which the Spring was now painting gaily, and the turf was neatly rolled and mown.

Though to me the place still spoke of gloom and tragedy, to Madeleine it was only sweet and peaceful; and as she knelt beneath the cross, tears which were but tears of quiet and gentle sadness and had no trace of any darker memories, welled up in her eyes.

"Ah, Lawrence!" she murmured. "Poor, poor little Adèle! She was so young—so pretty—and she was so cruelly treated. Oh, my darling, my little darling! thank God, that weight is lifted from my heart: and oh, how thankful I am, too, that it was not your own dear hand which struck that cruel blow! Ah, Lawrence," she continued, "do you think I was harsh with her?"

"Harsh with her, my darling? You were never harsh! There was only one who was

to blame in all, and even him we must forgive —for he is dead.”

“Lawrence,” said Madeleine, after a moment’s pause, “that woman—can we do nothing for her? I am sorry for her. She loved him so much, too.”

“Your wishes are mine, Madeleine,” I returned, “and besides, I cannot forget her, for it is to her in the end that we owe our present happiness.”

* * * *

Madeleine was rather silent in the train on the journey home; but as we walked hand in hand up the little path towards our cottage nestling amid the trees, she stopped and turned to me.

“Lawrence,” she said, “Promise me you will never make me jealous.”

When I had vowed with all a lover’s fervour I smiled and added, “But I cannot promise never to be jealous of you, Madeleine.”

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